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**PROJECT**

**C**ontemporary

**H**istorical

**E**xamination of

**C**urrent

**O**perations

**REPORT**

## **THE FOURTH OFFENSIVE**

**1 OCTOBER 1969**

**HQ PACAF**

**Directorate, Tactical Evaluation  
CHECO Division**

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**Prepared by:**

**Lt Col Bert B. Aton**

**Mr E. S. Montagliani**

**Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC**

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## PROJECT CHECO REPORTS

The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in the employment of USAF airpower to meet a multitude of requirements. The varied applications of airpower have involved the full spectrum of USAF aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, there has been an accumulation of operational data and experiences that, as a priority, must be collected, documented, and analyzed as to current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

Fortunately, the value of collecting and documenting our SEA experiences was recognized at an early date. In 1962, Hq USAF directed CINCPACAF to establish an activity that would be primarily responsive to Air Staff requirements and direction, and would provide timely and analytical studies of USAF combat operations in SEA.

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations, was established to meet this Air Staff requirement. Managed by Hq PACAF, with elements at Hq 7AF and 7AF/13AF, Project CHECO provides a scholarly, "on-going" historical examination, documentation, and reporting on USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in PACOM. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and examination which is being accomplished. Along with the other CHECO publications, this is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in PACOM.



MILTON B. ADAMS, Major General, USAF  
Chief of Staff

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FOR THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF

  
WARREN H. PETERSON, Colonel, USAF  
Chief, CHECO Division  
Directorate, Tactical Evaluation  
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- (4) AFXDOL . . . . . 1
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- (8) AFXOSO . . . . . 1
- (9) AFXOSS . . . . . 1
- (10) AFXOSV . . . . . 1
- (11) AFXOTR . . . . . 1
- (12) AFXOTW . . . . . 1
- (13) AFXOTZ . . . . . 1
- (14) AFXOXY . . . . . 1
- (15) AFXPD . . . . . 6
- (a) AFXPPGS . . . . . 3



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### a. TAC

#### (1) HEADQUARTERS

(a) DO . . . . .	1
(b) DPL . . . . .	2
(c) DOCC . . . . .	1
(d) DORQ . . . . .	1
(e) DIO . . . . .	1

#### (2) AIR FORCES

(a) 12AF	
1. DORF . . . . .	1
2. DI . . . . .	1
(b) 19AF(DI) . . . . .	1
(c) USAFSOF(DO) . . . . .	1

#### (3) AIR DIVISIONS

(a) 831AD(DO) . . . . .	1
(b) 832AD(DO) . . . . .	2
(c) 833AD(DDO) . . . . .	1
(d) 835AD(DO) . . . . .	1
(e) 836AD(DO) . . . . .	2
(f) 838AD	
1. DO . . . . .	1
(g) 839AD(DO) . . . . .	2

#### (4) WINGS

(a) 1SOW(DO) . . . . .	1
(b) 4TFW(DO) . . . . .	1
(c) 23TFW(DOI) . . . . .	1
(d) 27TFW(DOP) . . . . .	1
(e) 33TFW(DOI) . . . . .	1
(f) 64TFW(DO) . . . . .	1
(g) 67TRW(C) . . . . .	1
(h) 75TRW(DO) . . . . .	1
(i) 316TAW(DOP) . . . . .	1
(j) 317TAW(EX) . . . . .	1
(k) 363TRW(DOC) . . . . .	1
(l) 464TAW(DO) . . . . .	1
(m) 474TFW(TFOX) . . . . .	1
(n) 479TFW(DOF) . . . . .	1
(o) 516TAW(DOPL) . . . . .	1
(p) 441OCCTW(DOTR) . . . . .	1
(q) 451OCCTW(DO16-I) . . . . .	1
(r) 4554CCTW(DOI) . . . . .	1

#### (5) TAC CENTERS, SCHOOLS

(a) USAFTAWC(DA) . . . . .	2
(b) USAFTARC(DID) . . . . .	2
(c) USAFTALC(DCRL) . . . . .	1
(d) USAFTFWC(CRCD) . . . . .	1
(e) USAFSOC(DO) . . . . .	1
(f) USAFAGOS(DAB-C) . . . . .	1

### b. SAC

#### (1) HEADQUARTERS

(a) DOPL . . . . .	1
(b) DPLF . . . . .	1
(c) DM . . . . .	1
(d) DI . . . . .	1
(e) OA . . . . .	1
(f) HI . . . . .	1

#### (2) AIR FORCES

(a) 2AF(DICS) . . . . .	1
(b) 8AF(C) . . . . .	1
(c) 15AF(DOA) . . . . .	1

#### (3) AIR DIVISIONS

(a) 3AD(DO) . . . . .	3
-----------------------	---

### c. MAC

#### (1) HEADQUARTERS

(a) MAOID . . . . .	1
(b) MAOCO . . . . .	1
(c) MAFOI . . . . .	1
(d) MACOA . . . . .	1

#### (2) AIR FORCES

(a) 21AF(OCXI) . . . . .	1
(b) 22AF(OCXI) . . . . .	1

#### (3) AIR DIVISIONS

(a) 322AD(DO) . . . . .	1
-------------------------	---

#### (4) WINGS

(a) 61MAWg	
1. ODC . . . . .	1
2. OIN . . . . .	1
(b) 62MAWg(OCXP) . . . . .	1
(c) 436MAWg(OCXC) . . . . .	1

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(d) 437MAWg(OCXI) . . . . .	2	g. AFSC	
(e) 438MAWg(OCXC) . . . . .	1	(1) HEADQUARTERS	
(f) 445MAWg		(a) SCLAP . . . . .	3
1. OC . . . . .	1	(b) SCS-6 . . . . .	1
2. WDO-PLI . . . . .	1	(c) SCGCH . . . . .	2
(5) MAC SERVICES		(d) SCTPL . . . . .	1
(a) AWS(AWXW) . . . . .	1	(e) ASD/ASJT . . . . .	1
(b) ARRS(ARXLR) . . . . .	1	(f) ESD/ESO . . . . .	1
(c) ACGS(AGOV) . . . . .	1	(g) RADC/EMOEL . . . . .	2
(d) AAVS(AVODOD) . . . . .	1	(h) ADTC/ADP . . . . .	2
d. ADC		h. USAFSS	
(1) HEADQUARTERS		(1) HEADQUARTERS	
(a) ADODC . . . . .	1	(a) ODC . . . . .	1
(b) ADOOP . . . . .	1	(b) CHO . . . . .	1
(c) ADLCC . . . . .	1	(2) SUBORDINATE UNITS	
(2) AIR FORCES		(a) Eur Scty Rgn(OPD-P) . . .	1
(a) 1AF(DO) . . . . .	1	(b) 6940 Scty Wg(OOD) . . .	1
(b) 10AF		i. AAC	
1. ODC . . . . .	1	(1) HEADQUARTERS	
2. PDP-P . . . . .	1	(a) ALDOC-A . . . . .	2
(c) AF ICELAND(FICAS) . . .	2	j. USAFSO	
(3) AIR DIVISIONS		(1) HEADQUARTERS	
(a) 25AD(ODC) . . . . .	2	(a) COH . . . . .	1
(b) 29AD(ODC) . . . . .	1	k. PACAF	
(c) 31AD(ODC-A) . . . . .	2	(1) HEADQUARTERS	
(d) 33AD(OIN) . . . . .	1	(a) DP . . . . .	1
(e) 34AD(OIN) . . . . .	2	(b) DI . . . . .	1
(f) 35AD(CCR) . . . . .	1	(c) DO . . . . .	1
(g) 37AD(ODC) . . . . .	1	(d) DPL . . . . .	4
e. ATC		(e) CSH . . . . .	1
(1) HEADQUARTERS		(f) DOTECH . . . . .	5
(a) ATXDC . . . . .	1	(g) DE . . . . .	1
f. AFLC		(h) DM . . . . .	1
(1) HEADQUARTERS		(i) DOTECH . . . . .	1
(a) MCVSS . . . . .	1		
(b) MCOO . . . . .	1		



- (2) AIR FORCES
- (a) 5AF(DOPP) . . . . . 1
    - 1. Det 8, ASD(DOASD) . . . . . 1
  - (b) 7AF
    - 1. DO . . . . . 1
    - 2. DIXA . . . . . 1
    - 3. DPL . . . . . 1
    - 4. TACC . . . . . 1
    - 5. DOAC . . . . . 2
  - (c) 13AF
    - 1. DXIH . . . . . 1
    - 2. DPL . . . . . 1
  - (d) 7AF/13AF(CHECO) . . . . . 1
- (3) AIR DIVISIONS
- (a) 313AD(DOI) . . . . . 1
  - (b) 314AD(DOP) . . . . . 2
  - (c) 327AD
    - 1. DO . . . . . 1
    - 2. DI . . . . . 1
  - (d) 834AD(DO) . . . . . 2
- (4) WINGS
- (a) 8TFW(DCOA) . . . . . 1
  - (b) 12TFW(DCOI) . . . . . 1
  - (c) 35TFW(DCOI) . . . . . 1
  - (d) 37TFW(DCOI) . . . . . 1
  - (e) 56SOW(TVOC) . . . . . 1
  - (f) 347TFW(DCOOT) . . . . . 1
  - (g) 355TFW(DCOC) . . . . . 1
  - (h) 366TFW(DCO) . . . . . 1
  - (i) 388TFW(DCO) . . . . . 1
  - (j) 405FW(DCOA) . . . . . 1
  - (k) 432TRW(DCOI) . . . . . 1
  - (l) 460TRW(DCOI) . . . . . 1
  - (m) 475TFW(DCO) . . . . . 1
  - (n) 633SOW(DCOI) . . . . . 1
  - (o) 6400 Test Sq(A) . . . . . 1
- (5) OTHER UNITS
- (a) Task Force Alpha(DXI) . . . . . 1
  - (b) 504TASG(DO) . . . . . 1

- m. USAFE
- (1) HEADQUARTERS
- (a) ODC/OA . . . . . 1
  - (b) ODC/OTA . . . . . 1
  - (c) OOT . . . . . 1
  - (d) XDC . . . . . 1
- (2) AIR FORCES
- (a) 3AF(ODC) . . . . . 2
  - (b) 16AF(ODC) . . . . . 2
  - (c) 17AF
    - 1. ODC . . . . . 1
    - 2. OI D . . . . . 1
- (3) WINGS
- (a) 20TFW(CACC) . . . . . 1
  - (b) 36TFW(DCOID) . . . . . 1
  - (c) 50TFW(DCO) . . . . . 1
  - (d) 66TRW(DCOIN-T) . . . . . 1
  - (e) 81TFW(DCO) . . . . . 1
  - (f) 401TFW(DCOI) . . . . . 1
  - (g) 513TAW(OID) . . . . . 1
  - (h) 601TCG(CAACC) . . . . . 1
  - (i) 7101ABW(DCO-CP) . . . . . 1
  - (j) 7149TFW(DCOI) . . . . . 1
4. SEPARATE OPERATING AGENCIES
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    - (1) CMT . . . . . 1
    - (2) DFH . . . . . 1
  - e. AU
    - (1) ACSC-SA . . . . . 1
    - (2) AUL(SE)-69-108 . . . . . 2
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    - (4) ASI(ASHAF-A) . . . . . 2

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u.	CINCAL.	1
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## FOREWORD

On the night of 22-23 February 1969, the Communist forces in South Vietnam launched a major offensive. The ensuing action was variously called "The Post-Tet Offensive of 1969" and "The Winter-Spring Offensive of 1969". Since the enemy initiative was the fourth in a series of offensives beginning with the infamous Tet Campaign of 1968, this report is titled: "The Fourth Offensive".

Concerned with air response to the Fourth Offensive, the opening chapter establishes the enemy in South Vietnam, explains his goals, and describes his weaknesses and strengths. The second chapter provides an overview of the Fourth Offensive and the continuing Allied operations to deny the enemy the benefits of the initiative. It also compares the Fourth Offensive to its three predecessors, and then briefly analyzes the broad employment of airpower during the period of enemy attacks. The third, fourth, and fifth chapters describe the air and ground activity that occurred in the various geographical areas known as Corps Tactical Zones (CTZs). The concluding chapter reflects on the military lessons to be learned by a study of the Fourth Offensive.

During the period of this report, the Allied forces in Vietnam were forbidden to take offensive action on a strategic scale. Offensive air operations were prohibited over Cambodia and North Vietnam, and Allied ground forces were restricted to within the borders of South Vietnam. Although air interdiction continued in Laos, most of the air activity in



[REDACTED]

South Vietnam was directly related to the fire and maneuver of the forces on the ground. Therefore, for the most part, the air response to the enemy offensive must be explained in concert with the scheme of ground operations. Clearly, the concept of the Allies was one of vigorous tactical offense within the imposed bounds of a strategic defense. The enemy did not assault a static system of defense; the Allies moved out to meet the enemy in an effort to spoil his attacks and preempt the initiative. Thus, on the tactical scale, this study reports the clash of two offensives: the enemy's and the Allied forces.

CHAPTER I

THE ENEMY

*"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."*

--Sun Tzu

The enemy's Fourth Offensive is typical of much of the war in Vietnam--it does not seem to make much sense. The enemy's objectives were obscure and diffuse by any military criteria, and it is difficult to understand how he could have hoped to gain any significant or lasting military benefits. He probably did not.

The events of 1968 did much to convince the enemy that he knew our weakness. Without a single public concession, he had gained first a curtailment and then a total halt to the bombing of North Vietnam. Still, he had suffered heavy losses, and he may have misjudged the tenacity of his opponent. <sup>1/</sup>  
As President Richard M. Nixon said on 14 May 1969:

*"Reports from Hanoi indicate that the enemy has given up hope for a military victory in South Vietnam but is counting on a collapse of American will in the United States. They could make no greater error in judgment."*

*"Let me be quite blunt. Our fighting men are not going to be worn down; our negotiators are not going to be talked down; our Allies are not going to be let down."*

But in early 1969, U.S. intelligence estimates indicated that the enemy continued to cling to his ultimate goal--to reunify North and South Vietnam

[REDACTED]

under the rule of Hanoi's communist regime.<sup>2/</sup> As the President observed, the enemy expected American weariness of and opposition to the war to bring about the withdrawal of U.S. troops; captured documents disclosed that the enemy also hoped to gain a "leading role" in a coalition government. Once these interim objectives were achieved, he would patiently but persistently maneuver toward reunification.<sup>3/</sup> As the late President John F. Kennedy remarked, "The communists are forever saying, 'What is ours is ours; what is yours is negotiable.'"

The enemy's strategy was to "fight and talk". The combination was intended to promote protest and despair in the U.S., to weaken the Saigon government, and to advance the enemy's claim that the National Liberation Front (NLF) represented the majority of the South Vietnamese population. His tactics were designed to preserve his own strength, while inflicting the maximum losses on allied personnel and materiel. Rocket attacks on major cities were carried out to aggravate disagreement between the U.S. and the Government of Vietnam (GVN) over the halt in the bombing of the North. Terrorist activities continued in order to shake confidence in the GVN's ability to provide security. In the "other war", the enemy sought to weaken the GVN's Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC). At the same time, he attempted to bolster his own ostensible political strength in order to exploit the expected transformation to a coalition government.<sup>4/</sup>

The enemy's ambitions were greatly dependent upon the strength of the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI). The VCI functioned as the enemy's "shadow government". It existed at all political levels and in all geographical



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areas, either overtly or covertly, depending on the opposing strength of the GVN. The VCI was composed of hard-core party members who performed political, economic, and military functions. In support of military operations, the VCI operated a vigorous recruiting net to provide replacements for local and main force guerrilla units. It provided civilian labor for construction, transportation, supply, medical support, and the evacuation of wounded.

The Viet Cong combat units relied heavily on the VCI to furnish intelligence and provide guides to units operating in unfamiliar areas. To counter the initiative of the GVN's Accelerated Pacification Campaign, the VCI had begun to establish "People's Liberation Committees", an attempt to give the appearance of legitimate democratic government at the village and hamlet level. The People's Liberation Committees were composed of Communist party members selected by the VCI and "elected" by the populace.<sup>5/</sup>

In summary, the enemy's scenario for success anticipated the Paris negotiations would yield some form of coalition or compromise government, and he expected the transition to the new government would produce a period of turmoil and confusion. Thus, the enemy prepared both his military and political forces to exploit the crisis he was certain would come. He sought to instill flexibility and opportunism in his military units, exhorting them "to attack as soon as the abrupt transformation takes place without awaiting high-level instructions."<sup>6/</sup> He hoped that his People's Liberation Committees would present the new government with a political fait accompli.<sup>7/</sup>

The earliest dependable estimate of the enemy's strength in South

[REDACTED]

Vietnam dates back to October 1965. At that time, the enemy's in-country strength was about 207,000 men. In January 1969, his strength stood at approximately 222,000. Although his numbers had not changed appreciably, it was significant that in October 1965 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops comprised only 26 percent of the enemy's combat soldiers; by January 1969, NVA troops accounted for about 70 percent of the enemy's maneuver and support manpower. The following statistics show how VC and NVA troops were distributed during January 1969:<sup>8/</sup>

VC/NVA Strength in January 1969

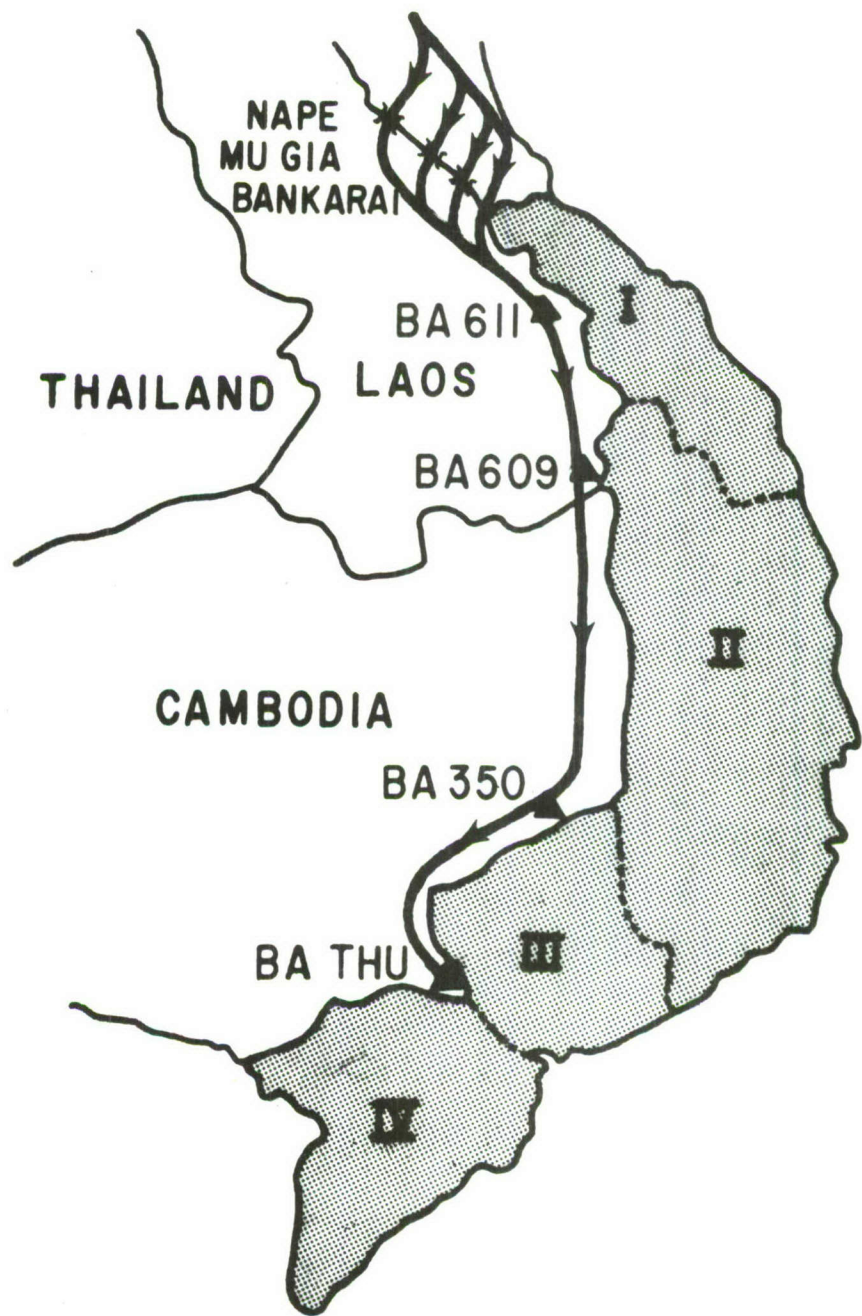
125,000	Maneuver and Support Troops
66,000	NVA in NVA Units
22,000	NVA in VC Units
37,000	VC in VC Units
47,000	Administrative Service Troops
9,000	NVA
38,000	VC
50,000	Guerrillas
222,000	Total VC/NVA Strength in South Vietnam

The NVA soldier followed a tortuous route to reach the battlefield. After his training was completed, he was formed into infiltration groups numbering usually about 500 - 600 men. These groups moved south into North Vietnam's panhandle and then turned southwest to enter Laos through the western edge of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), or through the Annam Mountains by way of one of three passes: Nape, Mu Gia, or Ban Karai. (Fig. 1.) Remaining within Laos and Cambodia, the NVA soldiers moved to the base area west of their destination. Troops destined for I Corps staged through Base Area 611 and the A Chau Valley. Replacements for enemy units in II Corps



**SECRET NOFORN**

**NVA INFILTRATION ROUTES  
AND  
MAJOR BASE AREAS**



**FIGURE 1**

**SECRET NOFORN**



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passed through Base Area 609 near the convergence of the borders of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (the Tri-Border Area). The primary distribution point for III Corps was Base Area 350, located on the Cambodian border opposite Phuoc Long Province. However, beginning in mid-1968, the enemy made increasing use of the Ba Thu area for infiltration into the marshland west and south-west of Saigon.<sup>9/</sup>

About 15 percent of the infiltrating soldiers never reached their destined base area. Attacking aircraft, sickness, and desertion accounted for the losses. Nevertheless, approximately 236,000 NVA soldiers reached South Vietnam during 1968 with the bulk going to I CTZ (34%) and III CTZ (31%). In 1969, the stream of infiltration shifted more heavily to the III and IV CTZs. Although the enemy's overall infiltration effort diminished in late 1968 and early 1969, he apparently retained ambitions for costly offensive actions--especially in III CTZ. During 1969, he planned to replace 73 percent of his strength in III Corps, while replacing only 38 percent in I Corps and 30 percent in II Corps.<sup>10/</sup>

A much smaller source of enemy manpower was in-country recruitment. Recruiting activity was feverish in those parts of South Vietnam which were controlled or contested by the enemy. Young men were recruited by force or persuasion. Recruits normally began their service as guerrillas and were later upgraded into local force units and finally to main force organizations. As 1969 began, the enemy was finding it increasingly difficult to meet his recruitment quotas. His manpower base shrank as he lost control of the

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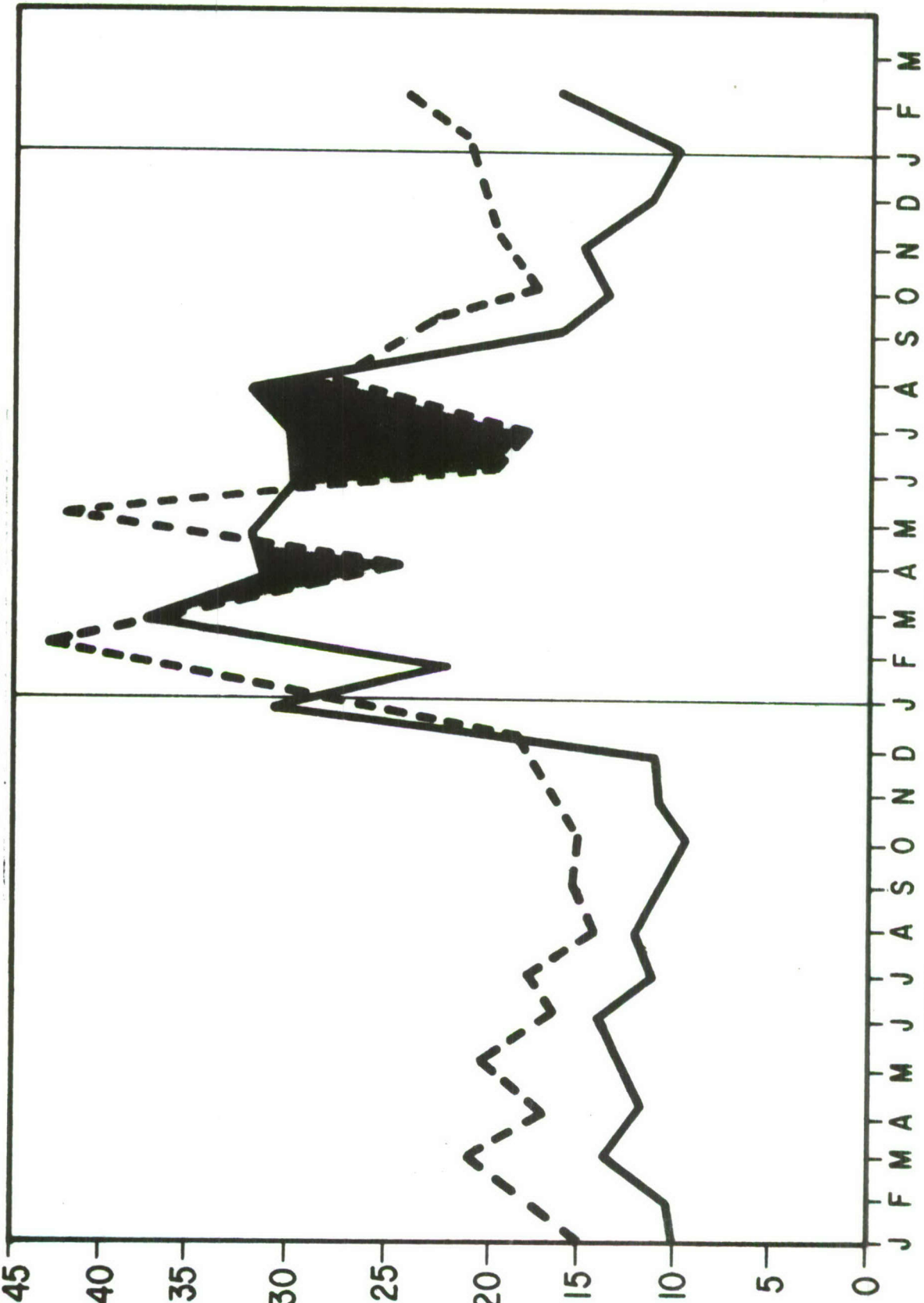
more populous areas, and the percentage of NVA soldiers in nominally VC units continued to increase.<sup>11/</sup>

Between January 1967 and February 1969, infiltration and in-country recruiting produced the gains in strength shown in Figure 2. Here also are shown the enemy's losses over that time period--losses due to battle casualties, defections, desertions, and the withdrawal of some NVA units from South Vietnam. The enemy's losses exceeded his gains throughout 1967. Then his gains rose sharply during the first eight months of 1968 only to drop dramatically in the latter part of 1968 as his infiltration slowed and two NVA divisions were pulled back into North Vietnam. Figure 2 shows the price of his 1968 Tet Offensive and his second offensive in May 1968--each adventure cost him more than 40,000 men. Although his third offensive in August was comparatively weak, Figure 2 reveals that it, too, was costly. Note that the enemy was unable to achieve a net gain except during those periods of calm following his first two offensives. Apparently hoping to increase his numbers, he remained relatively inactive for six months before his Fourth Offensive in February 1969, but he had not been able to realize a net gain in any month between his third and fourth offensives.<sup>12/</sup>

The enemy's combat power was dropping not only in terms of troop strength, but also in terms of quality. The quality of his soldiers was declining for a number of reasons. One reason was age; the Viet Cong, especially, found it necessary to recruit much younger men. In 1968, for example, at least one third of the VC's indigenous recruits were between the ages of 13 and 17. The combat experience level of his troops was also declining. During

# VC & NVA GAINS VS LOSSES

THOUSANDS



LEGEND

- GAINS
- - - LOSSES
- NET GAINS

1967

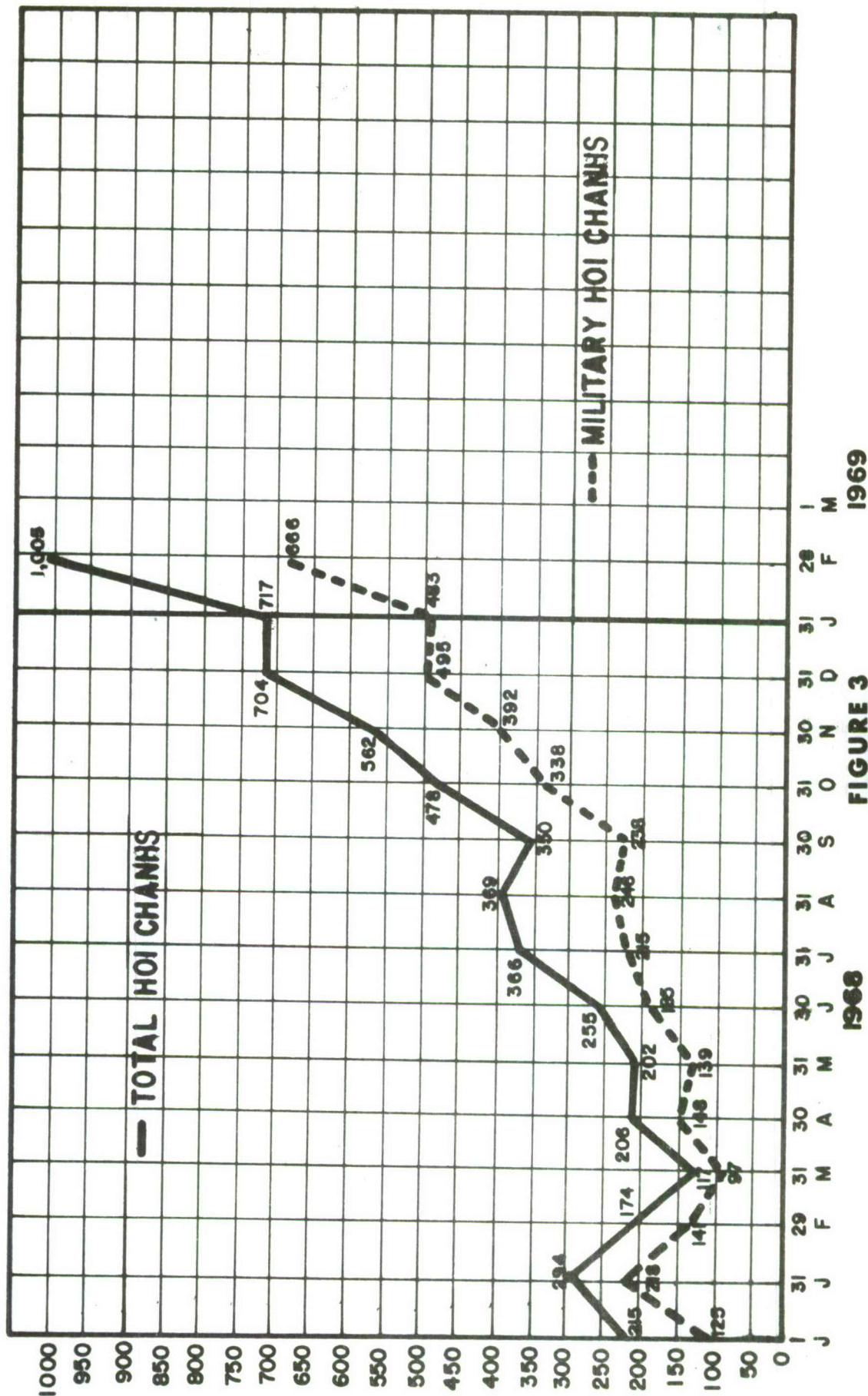
FIGURE 2

1968

1969



# HOI CHANH JANUARY 1968 - MARCH 1969



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1968, the enemy lost 289,000 men--more than 100 percent of his average in-country strength. His losses, combined with the shrinking population base for recruitment, forced the enemy to press women into service as soldiers. Captured documents revealed that the enemy planned to employ female soldiers at levels up to 25 percent of unit strength in the Highlands and up to 50 percent in the Delta.<sup>13/</sup>

There were many indications that the enemy was suffering in the related areas of leadership and morale. The testimony of prisoners affirmed a serious shortage of combat-seasoned leaders. Although morale had always been a problem for the enemy, there was evidence in late 1968 and early 1969 that enemy morale was dropping dramatically. Captured documents revealed that enemy leaders felt an increasing concern that their soldiers were growing more weary and eager for peace as the war dragged on interminably. As the enemy's morale dropped, an increasing number of his personnel took advantage of the GVN's Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) Program and chose to return to GVN jurisdiction as Hoi Chanhs (returnees). Figure 3 indicates the rapid rise in the number of Hoi Chanhs since September 1968. Significantly, the greatest number of Hoi Chanhs came from IV Corps where the percentage of NVA soldiers was still low, and some semblance of an indigenous war remained. The number of Hoi Chanhs drove the enemy to drastic efforts to stem the flow. He increased his propaganda and troop indoctrination and frantically sought out Hoi Chanhs for reprisal.<sup>14/</sup>

The enemy's declining combat power forced him to reposition his forces; he had to employ strict economy of force in areas of lesser importance to



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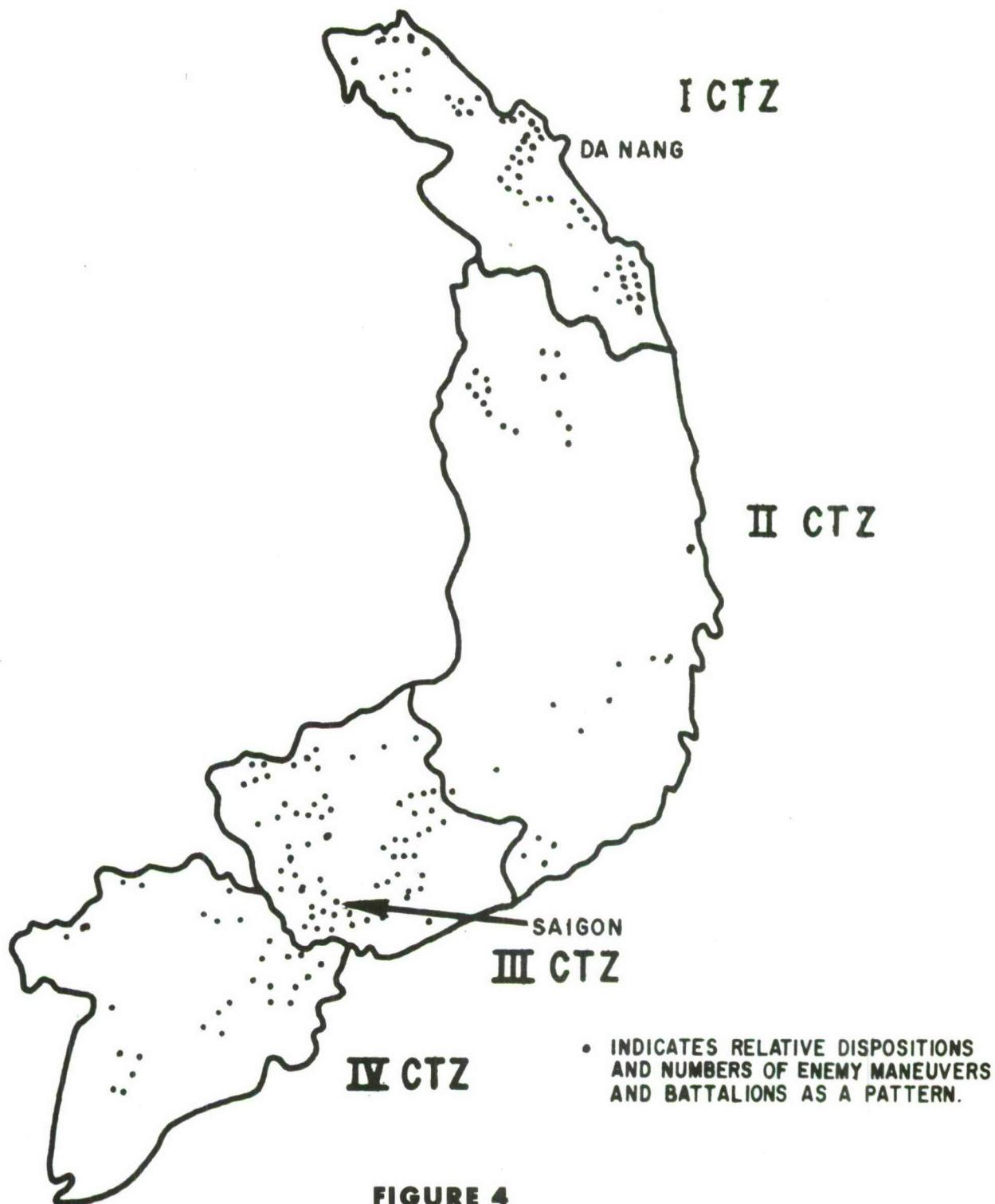
achieve a measure of Mass against his primary objectives. The enemy's principal interests lay in I Corps and III Corps, and he found it necessary to draw down his forces in II and IV Corps to retain a threatening posture against Da Nang and Saigon. (Fig. 4.) By early 1969, for example, he had moved three battalions from IV CTZ into III CTZ, and had redeployed seven regiments from the central highlands into the area around Saigon. The changing enemy situation in III CTZ offers a stark illustration of the enemy's decreasing combat power. In 1968, the enemy carried off his spectacular Tet Offensive with only 49 combat battalions positioned in III CTZ. On the eve of his Fourth Offensive, he had 89 combat battalions deployed in III CTZ, but this greater number of battalions packed an inferior punch.<sup>15/</sup>

Although the enemy grew weaker in South Vietnam, he retained forces in North Vietnam (Fig. 5) which threatened to tip the balance in northern I CTZ. The ominous presence of three NVA divisions just north of the DMZ held sizable friendly forces fixed to face this threat, thus enhancing the enemy's chances for success where he sought it--farther to the south.<sup>16/</sup>

Looming in the background was the enemy's strategic reserve, a force no longer deterred by bombing or depleted by the duties of repair and the demands for air defense of the homeland. In addition to the three infantry divisions in the vicinity of the DMZ, the enemy held in reserve four infantry divisions, four independent infantry regiments, one airborne brigade, and one armored regiment--more than 90,000 men. At any time he chose, the enemy could thrust this force across the DMZ to upset the balance in the south.<sup>17/</sup>

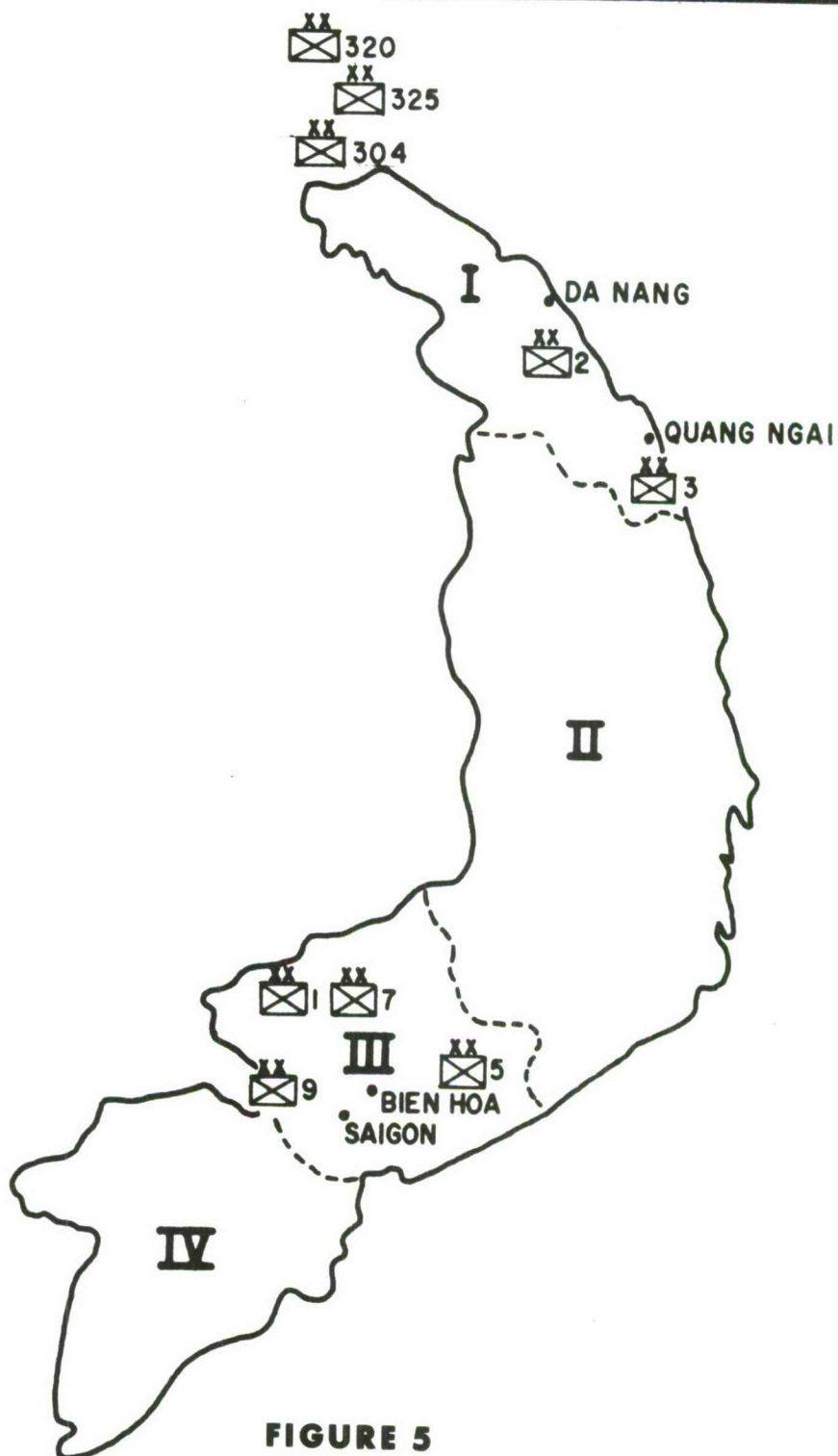


**APPROXIMATE DISPOSITIONS OF ENEMY MANEUVER BATTALIONS  
IN SOUTH VIETNAM (MID February 1969)**



**FIGURE 4**

**ENEMY DIVISION DISPOSITIONS**  
**(MID February 1969)**



**FIGURE 5**

[REDACTED]

The forces described here were sustained in the broadest sense by the industrial bases of the Soviet Union, the Communist bloc nations of eastern Europe, and by Red China. The Soviets supplied about 70-80 percent of the war materiel which found its way to the enemy's forward supply bases in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In the early months of 1969, the enemy supply bases in North Vietnam and Cambodia were politically protected from air attack, and friendly ground units had always been restrained from striking the enemy's out-country sanctuaries.<sup>18/</sup>

Many of the enemy's supplies moved along the same lines of communication (LOCs) that carried soldiers toward the south. Supplies destined for the northern regions of South Vietnam entered the panhandle of North Vietnam by truck, rail, and water, and were then trucked into Laos.<sup>19/</sup>

One of the chief purposes of the bombing of North Vietnam had been to reduce the flow of supplies from North to South Vietnam. The bombing curtailment of 31 March 1968 had confined Allied air interdiction efforts to Laos and that part of North Vietnam lying below the 19th parallel. On 28 May 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson stated the enemy was exploiting our restraint: "At the present time, they are pouring men and supplies through this area at an unprecedented rate. The supplies go directly to the battle in South Vietnam. We are destroying something over 20 percent of what is coming through to the South."<sup>20/</sup>

Even as the President spoke, emergency efforts were under way to reduce the enemy's resupply by a much greater percentage. On 14 July 1968, Seventh Air Force initiated its "Summer Interdiction Campaign" which was to continue



[REDACTED]

until the bombing halt of 1 November 1968. In December 1968, Brig. Gen. George J. Keegan, Jr., Seventh Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff/Intelligence, wrote of the interdiction program: <sup>21/</sup>

*"This campaign succeeded in its objectives. Enemy truck traffic moving into South Vietnam and Laos was brought to a virtual standstill; the enemy's water-crossing points were successfully interdicted; and the enemy's net through-put of logistics supplies was reduced to well below his minimum consumption requirements, both in Laos and in the two Northern Corps Areas of South Vietnam....The results achieved, either for this war or any previous war, were unprecedented. A 90 percent reduction of the enemy's net logistics tonnage through-put into Laos was accomplished. The enemy's tonnage was reduced from an approximate 340 tons per day in July to less than 35 tons per day in September. By October, this tonnage was effectively reduced to what men could carry into Laos on their backs. Overall, enemy traffic flow along infiltration routes was reduced by 97 percent--from 1,289 sightings in the period 10 to 23 July to fewer than 43 sightings between 16 and 30 October--the latter being confined almost exclusively to shuttling in support of road construction efforts between interdiction points."*

Then came the bombing halt permitting the enemy to move unimpeded within North Vietnam. He used the month of November for feverish repair of the LOCs leading into Laos. During December 1968, the tonnages entering Laos rose very sharply to about 300 tons per day--at least a tenfold increase over October's flow. <sup>22/</sup> In the first four months of 1969, there were even greater in-puts into the Laotian network of roads and trails that had long been labeled the Ho Chi Minh Trail. An exhaustive Seventh Air Force study concluded that during the period 1 January - 29 April 1969, the enemy brought 46,199 tons of supplies into Laos--an average of 388 tons per day. <sup>23/</sup>

[REDACTED]

However, the bombing halt had roughly coincided with the onset of the Northeast Monsoon--a season that brought cloudiness to North Vietnam and relatively clear skies to Laos. Long before the bombing halt had been announced, Seventh Air Force had planned to shift the weight of its interdiction into Laos to follow the favorable weather. Seventh Air Force Operations Plan 544-69, dated 29 August 1968, had established Operation COMMANDO HUNT to strike the enemy's Laotian LOCs during the winter and spring of 1968-1969.<sup>24/</sup> COMMANDO HUNT began on 15 November 1968, but there was difficulty in judging its effectiveness during the closing weeks of 1968--the data were incomplete. However, a Seventh Air Force study of COMMANDO HUNT provided sufficient data on the first four months of 1969 to conclude that:<sup>25/</sup>

*"Interdiction in Laos had a significant impact on the enemy's capability to conduct military operations in South Vietnam. To receive one unit of supply or materiel, the enemy required five units of input into Laos. Nearly one-third of all input was consumed by the logistic infrastructure within Laos. The time required for a unit of materiel or supplies to pass through Laos to South Vietnam was about seven days with interdiction, as compared with one day if there had been no interdiction. The additional time required to transport supplies through Laos imposed additional costs on the enemy in the form of more materiel in the pipeline at risk for a longer period and requiring additional personnel to handle and protect it. The interdiction campaign forced the enemy to allocate significant resources to counter the effects of the attacks."*

*"From [1] January to [29] April 1969, the enemy's logistical input into Laos was disposed of as follows:*

- 47 percent was destroyed in Laos*
- 29 percent was consumed in the system*
- 6 percent went into storage*
- 18 percent came through to South Vietnam*



[REDACTED]

*"In sum, 82 percent of his input into Laos failed to reach South Vietnam."*

But the mystique of the Ho Chi Minh Trail could be misleading. Laos was not the only route by which supplies reached the northern provinces. Nor was the enemy so heavily dependent upon external sources as people might like to believe. The Seventh Air Force study estimated that the enemy's supply requirements in I and II CTZs were met from external and internal sources according to the percentages shown here, with Laos providing the indicated percentages of external supply.

Sources of Enemy Supplies

I Corps Tactical Zone

Internal Sources	40%	
External Sources	60%	
Via Laos		85%
Via Other Routes		15%

II Corps Tactical Zone

Internal Sources	70%	
External Sources	30%	
Via Laos		50%
Via Other Routes		50%

Thus, Laotian LOCs carried only  $(.60 \times .85=)$  51 percent of the enemy's supplies into I Corps and only  $(.30 \times .50=)$  15 percent of his stores into II CTZ. <sup>26/</sup>

From its inception, out-country air interdiction had forced the enemy to seek shelter from the pounding of airpower. He had found it in Cambodia. After the Summer Interdiction Campaign, General Keegan concluded: <sup>27/</sup>



[REDACTED]

*"....The success of this campaign establishes beyond question the magnitude of the enemy's logistic dependence on Cambodia. With the effective closure of the North Vietnam supply system, the enemy has been forced to rely almost exclusively upon Cambodia for his logistics support of combat operations in South Vietnam."*

The enemy later verified General Keegan's estimate. Speaking on 23 January 1969, Nguyen Son Hai, Second Secretary of the North Vietnamese (NVN) Embassy in Cambodia, said: <sup>28/</sup>

*"Cambodia plays an important role in the war--the Sihanouk Government has done its utmost to aid North Vietnam. Cambodia is the strategic depot for ammunition and heavy weapons which are transported there by air--North Vietnam could not move enough equipment to the front if North Vietnam relied only on a small trail through the mountains."*

Supplies to nourish the war in III and IV CTZs entered Cambodia not only by air, but also by sea through the port of Sihanoukville. From their point of entry, the supplies were either trucked to border base areas or funneled into South Vietnam by way of the Mekong Delta's intricate network of water-<sup>29/</sup>ways.

Regardless of their origin and route, some portion of the enemy's supplies ultimately found its way to his scattered sanctuaries; 15 such major base areas lay just across the borders in Laos and Cambodia, and 18 were located inside South Vietnam. These base areas contained replacement staging points, training compounds, medical facilities, and supply dumps. In 1968 and early 1969, the enemy's in-country sanctuaries came under increasing Allied pressure. During the spring of 1968, the A Shau Valley in I CTZ was entered for the

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first time since 1965. In IV CTZ, nearly all the enemy's base areas were probed aggressively; significantly, the Allies entered the enemy's previously untouched sanctuary in the U Minh Forest. With his base areas becoming more vulnerable, the enemy's energies were increasingly diverted to the security of his own logistical rear.<sup>30/</sup>

The enemy's in-country supply operations were necessarily covert and primitive. He moved his stores primarily by porter, bicycle, pack animal, and shallow-draft boat. Since he was unable to maintain an intact logistical trail, he depended heavily on the prepositioning of supply caches. Although this procedure enabled the enemy's combat units to move unencumbered, his offensive actions could easily be preempted by the Allied discovery and capture of his caches. Even when his caches were not denied him, his offensive moves were limited in both scope and duration by the quantity of supplies he was able to conceal. Without continuous and immediate replenishment of his consumables, the enemy might periodically seize the initiative, but he could neither retain nor exploit it.<sup>31/</sup>

[REDACTED]

CHAPTER II  
AN OVERVIEW OF  
THE FOURTH OFFENSIVE

*"In war, the only sure defense is offense, and the efficiency of offense depends on the warlike souls of those conducting it."*

--Gen. George S. Patton, Jr.

The Fourth Offensive began during the night of 22-23 February 1969. Within the first few days, the enemy revealed the internal weaknesses that were described earlier. But the force and impact of the Communist offensive were markedly degraded by external elements as well--the pre-emptive actions by the Allies that took place both before and during the offensive.<sup>1/</sup>

Gen. Creighton W. Abrams was obviously a disciple of the Patton doctrine. General Abrams became Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV), on 3 July 1968, and Allied operations quickly became more conspicuously infused with the spirit of the offensive. The enemy's Third Offensive in August 1968 was disrupted by aggressive Allied spoiling attacks and the discovery and destruction of the enemy's supplies.<sup>2/</sup> Beginning in September 1968, Communist troops withdrew in large numbers to their jungle sanctuaries, there to rest, regroup, and refit.<sup>3/</sup> The resulting lull in enemy-initiated incidents did not slow the tempo of Allied operations. General Abrams believed the enemy was busily rebuilding his strength for a Fourth Offensive:<sup>4/</sup> "It is a period of feverish activity on the enemy's



[REDACTED]

part, so it's got to be a period of feverish activity for us."

If the enemy's expected offensive were to be successful, he would need to move his forces and their supplies along the lines of operation that would connect his base areas with his objectives. The weight of enemy effort to be thrust along each line of operations would be determined by two factors: the quantity of resources that could be introduced from the bases at one end of the line, and the desirability of the objective at the other end. As we have seen, air interdiction influenced both the output and the routing of the enemy's lines of resupply and reinforcement. After the bombing halt of November 1968, North Vietnam joined Cambodia as a safe haven for the movement of enemy troops and supplies. Obviously, the enemy could support larger forces in areas adjacent to his sanctuaries. At the same time, the enemy's political and psychological objectives directed his attention toward the seats of power and population. Thus, it was rather predictable that the enemy would seek to concentrate his forces in I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ) and in III CTZ, and would point his power toward South Vietnam's two largest cities--Saigon and DaNang.<sup>5/</sup>

The Communist forces that had withdrawn into North Vietnam and Cambodia were not accessible to the Allies, but in late 1968, COMUSMACV deployed his forces to oppose the enemy's proximate and potential strength. Using the mobility afforded by tactical airlift, General Abrams moved the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) from northern I CTZ into III CTZ and deployed the Division in a highly mobile screening role along the Cambodian border.<sup>6/</sup>

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Rather than wait for the VC/NVA to return to combat at a time and place of their own choosing, Allied forces vigorously pursued the enemy into his in-country base areas and engaged him wherever he could be found. All the while friendly forces continued their relentless search for the enemy's supply caches.<sup>7/</sup> Simultaneously, Seventh Air Force conducted in-country campaigns of air interdiction.<sup>8/</sup> The Communist troops found themselves being constantly chased, battered, bombed, and badgered; the pattern continued unabated even during the Fourth Offensive.<sup>9/</sup>

The Allied dispositions that were designed to find, fix, and fight the enemy were equally appropriate, in terms of balance and location, to counter his expected attacks. As the Fourth Offensive approached, the opposing forces were deployed as follows:<sup>10/</sup>

Deployment of Maneuver Battalions  
(Week of 20-26 February 1969)

	Friendly		Enemy	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
I CTZ	85	27.6	80	32.4
II CTZ	65	21.1	43	17.4
III CTZ	108	35.1	89	36.0
IV CTZ	<u>50</u>	<u>16.2</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>14.2</u>
TOTAL	308	100.0	247	100.0

Continuous contact with the enemy had kept Allied forces constantly aware of his position and movements. Thus, his Fourth Offensive brought none of the surprise that he had achieved in his Tet Offensive of 1968. No major

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Allied troop movements were forced by his attacks, and U.S. intelligence was vastly improved. Seventh Air Force, for example, was able to provide both ample and accurate warning to its units. On 3 February 1969, units were told that the enemy was preparing an offensive. On 15 February, the warning went out to expect a major enemy offensive after Tet (17-19 February). On 21 February, Seventh Air Force directed a Yellow Alert for 2400H on 22 February. On the eve of the enemy offensive, the Yellow Alert was moved up to 2200H, a precaution that was barely four hours premature--the bulk of the enemy's attacks erupted at 0200H on the morning of 23 February. Nor did the enemy's subsequent actions significantly degrade military intelligence; three later surges of activity were predicted with comparable accuracy. 11/

In broad chronology, the Fourth Offensive unfolded as follows: beginning on the night of 22-23 February, the communists unleashed a well-coordinated, country-wide volley of attacks. Within the first 48 hours, the enemy struck more than 331 targets throughout the length and breadth of South Vietnam. Most of his actions were limited to attacks by fire (ABFs)--standoff shellings by rockets, mortars, and some artillery. His initial targets included 39 populated areas, but the heaviest weight fell against Allied military units and facilities. The enemy showed no marked favoritism among the various types and nationalities of friendly military units; U.S., Free World, and South Vietnamese forces each received its fair share of the enemy's attention. Some emphasis was noted on paramilitary forces: Civil Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Camps, Regional Forces and



[REDACTED]

Popular Forces (RF/PF), and the People's Self Defense Force.<sup>12/</sup> But, with the exception of the attacks in the Bien Hoa/Long Binh area (see Chapter III), the opening flurry of enemy activity generally lacked both focus and form.<sup>13/</sup>

A second discernible high point in the offensive started in the central highlands during the night of 3-4 March. An estimated enemy battalion, supported by 10 Soviet PT-76 amphibious tanks, attacked the Ben Het Special Forces Camp located near the tri-border juncture northwest of Kontum. Ben Het's attackers were driven back across the border, but to the west of Kontum, the 66th NVA Regiment remained active in the vicinity of Polei Kleng from 3 through 13 March at a cost of more than 400 of its members killed in action (KIA).<sup>14/</sup>

On 6 March, the action shifted back to III CTZ. Saigon was hit with its largest rocket attack of the offensive; 22 were killed and 28 were wounded.<sup>15/</sup> Then, in Tay Ninh Province (western III CTZ), the enemy mounted two bloody assaults against Landing Zone Grant--the first on 8 March, and the second on 11 March. The two attacks killed 16 and wounded 50 Allied soldiers, but the enemy paid dearly--he suffered 243 KIA and 6 detained. He also lost a considerable number of weapons. With the exception of one enemy battalion-sized attack in southern IV CTZ on 11 March, the enemy's "large scale significant attacks" were confined to III CTZ for the remainder of the offensive.<sup>16/</sup> During the week of 30 March - 5 April both friendly and enemy KIAs fell below the weekly averages for a

[REDACTED]

six-month period.<sup>17/</sup> The Fourth Offensive was judged to have ended on  
3 April 1968.<sup>18/</sup>

Since the Fourth Offensive produced so few distinguishing characteristics of its own, perhaps it can best be understood by comparison with or contrast to earlier enemy offensives. According to the then Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, the enemy's Tet Offensive of 1968 was intended "to destroy or subvert the GVN/Allied forces, eliminate [the structure of the] Government of Vietnam..., create a general uprising among the people, and establish a revolutionary government dominated by the National Liberation Front".<sup>19/</sup> The Fourth Offensive had much more modest aims. There was general agreement among the U.S. intelligence community that the enemy's "main target" in the Fourth Offensive "...was to influence his position of power at the conference table in Paris. He attempted to create dissension between the United States and the Government of Vietnam by using rockets on the cities, which would presumably create some argument between the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments over whether the bombing should be resumed. Finally, by his attacks throughout South Vietnam, he hoped to undermine public confidence in the Thieu Administration".<sup>20/</sup> Of course, his highest hope for concessions in Paris lay in the further erosion of U.S. perseverance.<sup>21/</sup>

Despite its more limited objectives, the Fourth Offensive was "larger", in purely statistical terms, than any of its three predecessors (Fig 6). When all four Communist offensives are statistically compared with similar 30-day periods, it can be seen that the Fourth Offensive produced the largest



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number of enemy attacks and the greatest enemy expenditure of heavy ordnance. Yet, the Fourth Offensive carried much less force and impact than its nearest rival a year earlier.<sup>22/</sup>

In terms of scope and coordination, the Fourth Offensive was quite comparable to Tet 1968. Like the 1968 Tet Campaign, the Fourth Offensive was both widespread and well-coordinated. In both offensives, the enemy struck targets throughout South Vietnam, from the DMZ to the lower Mekong Delta. During the first three weeks of Tet 1968, the enemy attacked some 40 of the 44 provincial capitals, almost 80 of the district capitals, and all of the major cities except Hue. Initial attacks of the Fourth Offensive occurred almost simultaneously, whereas the attacks of Tet 1968 were somewhat staggered, reportedly because of faulty communications.<sup>23/</sup> On the other hand, the enemy's most ambitious effort, the assault on Bien Hoa and Long Binh, was sadly uncoordinated; only a fraction of his planned attack units arrived at its objective, and even these forces were committed piecemeal and ineffectually.<sup>24/</sup>

The more limited aims of the Fourth Offensive were reflected in the enemy's selection of targets, his tactics, and the lower intensity of the fighting. In the 1968 Tet Offensive, the enemy committed virtually all of the Viet Cong main and local force units, along with a substantial portion of the available North Vietnamese Army forces. Tet 1968 had produced not only widespread attacks by fire, but also numerous heavy ground assaults against all the major urban centers in South Vietnam, as well as a number of the larger Allied military bases. Parts of Saigon, Can Tho,



[REDACTED]

My Tho, Hue, Nha Trang, Phu Yen, Dalat, Kontum, and Ban Me Thout had been seized and held by the enemy for significant periods of time. Many of these initially successful enemy assaults had dictated the hasty redeployment of large friendly forces, and the enemy had been dislodged or destroyed only after extremely bitter and sustained fighting.<sup>25/</sup>

In contrast to Tet 1968, the Fourth Offensive produced only 14 so-called "large-scale significant attacks" (7 within the first week),<sup>26/</sup> and all of these were repulsed by the Allies. Most of the ground assaults that did occur were conducted by relatively small enemy units that were targeted against Allied outposts rather than areas that were heavily defended by friendly forces. The enemy tactics of the Fourth Offensive strongly suggested that he sought to inflict as much damage as possible at the least risk to his own forces--there was scant evidence of the audacity he had displayed a year earlier. For the most part, he was content to lob in a brief barrage of indirect fire, and then seek shelter quickly--hopefully before he could be decimated by friendly air and artillery.<sup>27/</sup>

The impact of the Fourth Offensive was reduced by the enemy's cautious and conservative tactics, and the fact that he either chose, or was forced, to fight in relatively remote areas. The resulting benefits accrued chiefly to the civilian sector of South Vietnamese society. The Tet Offensive of 1968 had produced almost 900,000 civilian refugees, caused widespread destruction of urban property, inflicted a

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COMPARATIVE OFFENSIVE STATISTICS

AFTER 30 DAYS

	1968			1969
	TET 30Jan-28Feb	MAY 5May-3Jun	3d OFFENSIVE 18Jan-16Sep	4th OFFENSIVE 23Feb-24Mar
Attacks By Fire	1,292	1,242	598	1,982
Over 20 Rounds	392	376	184	407
Under 20 Rounds	900	866	414	1,575
Nr. Rounds	19,501	21,777	10,993	27,217
Ground Attacks	247	161	86	387
Enemy KIA	30,691	22,213	14,665	22,945
FR KIA	5,474	3,592	2,721	3,159
U.S. KIA	1,825	1,354	902	1,080
KIA RATIO EN/FR	5.61/1	6.18/1	5.39/1	7.26/1
KIA RATIO EN/US	16.8/1	16.4/1	16.3/1	21.2/1

SOURCE: MACV J-2

FIGURE 6

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serious blow to pacification, brought severe dislocation to the economy, and raised considerable doubt among the urban population as to the GVN's competence to provide security. Conversely, the Fourth Offensive produced only 23,000 refugees during its first two weeks, brought about very little destruction of civilian property, saw scant disruption of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, and generated much less distress among the populace. <sup>28/</sup>

One report suggested that most South Vietnamese citizens showed "... very slight concern about the Government's ability to handle the situation...." and described the city residents as being "phlegmatic" in accepting the Fourth Offensive. <sup>29/</sup> Indeed, there was slight cause for civil alarm; the Fourth Offensive produced civilian casualties at a rate less than one-tenth of those caused by Tet 1968. <sup>30/</sup>

On the other hand, the enemy's hit-and-run tactics initially spared him the markedly disproportionate losses he had suffered a year earlier. During the first week of Tet 1968, the enemy had inflicted 416 battle deaths on U.S. forces; over the same period, enemy losses in all engagements amounted to about 16,000 KIA. <sup>31/</sup> The comparable period of the Fourth Offensive yielded a kill ratio that was much less favorable to the U.S.; in the first week, 489 Americans died in battle, while the Allies reaped a grim exchange of 6,717 communists. <sup>32/</sup> And yet, the trade-offs of the opening week were highly misleading with respect to the longer run. Compared to its three predecessors, over similar 30-day periods, the Fourth Offensive produced kill ratios that were highly favorable to the Allies;



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in fact, the most favorable (Fig. 6) among the four.<sup>33/</sup> The enemy's inability or unwillingness to penetrate the cities allowed the more lavish use of Allied firepower and thereby permitted conservation of friendly manpower.<sup>34/</sup>

If the Fourth Offensive had a single distinguishing feature, it was the enemy's attacks against U.S. air bases and other Allied military installations. One enemy prisoner revealed that small sapper units had been trained in North Vietnam specifically to attack and penetrate air base defenses.<sup>35/</sup>

Few of the enemy's attacks succeeded in penetrating base defenses, and in no case was there any serious danger that a base would be overrun or captured. However, the enemy did inflict considerable damage to materiel. During the period of the Offensive, the enemy destroyed: 24,518 tons of ammunition; at least 1,114,000 gallons of petroleum products, along with petroleum tanks with a capacity of 2,352,200 gallons. Thirty-seven aircraft were destroyed and 331 were damaged on the ground (Fig. 7). Brig. Gen. George J. Keegan, Jr., Seventh Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff/Intelligence, estimated that the enemy destroyed between 75 and 100 million dollars worth of military stores and equipment.<sup>36/</sup> With respect to the aircraft losses inflicted by the Fourth Offensive, a Department of Defense analysis observed:<sup>37/</sup>

*"One factor that has undoubtedly kept the.... losses of USAF fighter/attack aircraft well below the high losses [of] last year is the*

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U.S. AIRCRAFT DAMAGED AND DESTROYED

23 FEBRUARY-3 APRIL 1969

<u>SERVICE</u>	<u>DESTROYED</u>	<u>MAJOR DAMAGE</u>	<u>MINOR DAMAGE</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
USAF	2	5	26	33
USN	3	0	0	3
USMC	12	1	15	28
USA	<u>20</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>253</u>	<u>304</u>
TOTAL	37	37	294	368

SOURCE: Brig. Gen. G. J. Keegan, 7AF, DI

FIGURE 7

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# TACTICAL AIR STRIKE SORTIES USAF,USN,USMC,UNAF

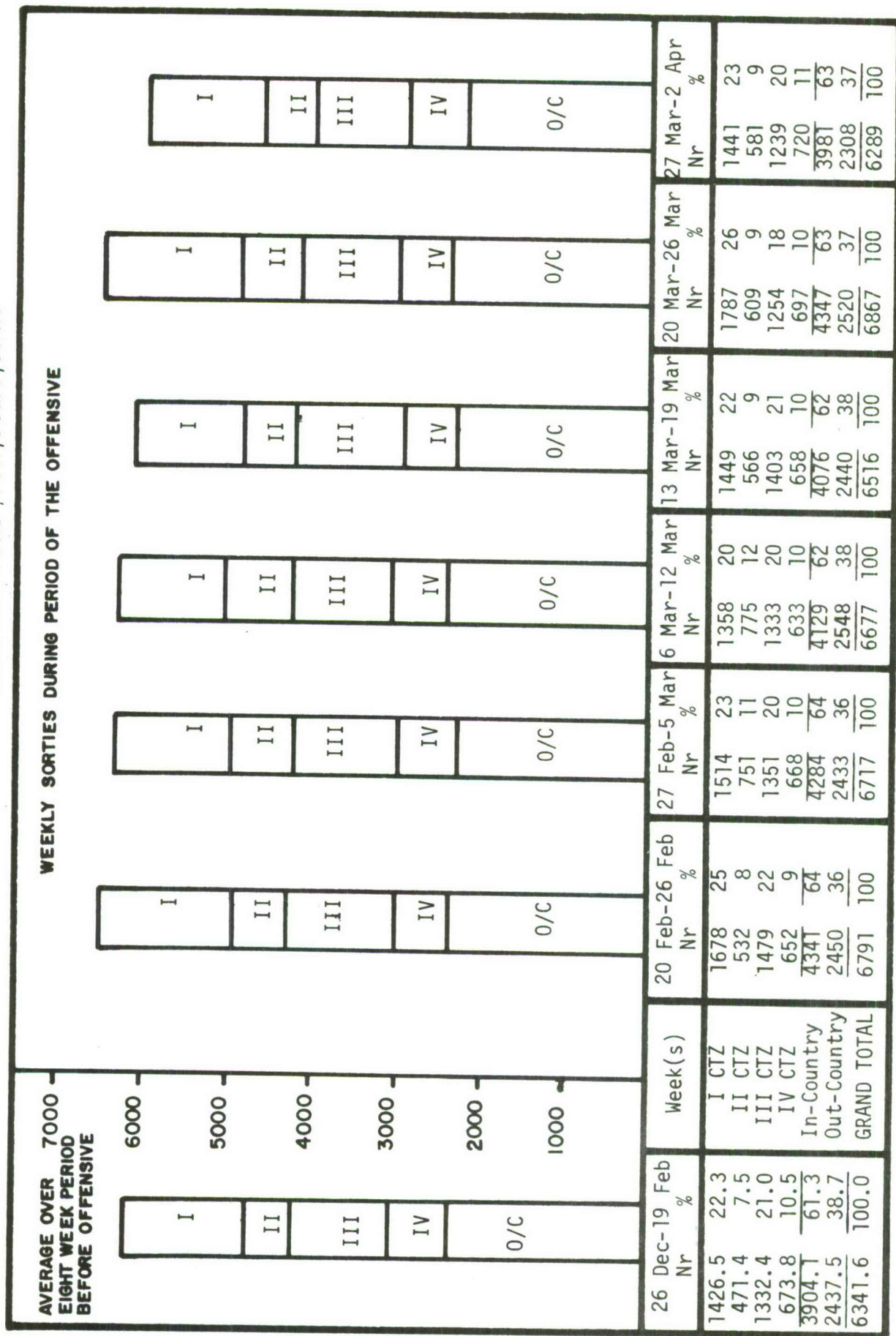


FIGURE 8



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*covered shelters now at most bases. At Da Nang an enemy 122-mm rocket round made a direct hit on a shelter housing a fully armed F-4. There was no damage to the aircraft, and only minor surface damage to the shelter. In all, 573 concrete covered shelters will be constructed in South Vietnam; 408 at USAF/VNAF bases, and 165 for Marine/Navy aircraft. At about \$26,000 per shelter, the one known aircraft save at Da Nang has already paid for 20% of the shelter program. (On March 20 an undetermined number of 122-mm rocket rounds hit the Marine Air Base at Chu Lai. Six A-4s were destroyed and nine damaged. These aircraft were not parked in revetments, nor were any of the planned covered shelters complete for them."*

By massing his forces near his sanctuaries to shorten his lines of communication and by husbanding his resources, the enemy was able to mount his offensive. How was airpower used to respond to the enemy initiative? Two time periods were analyzed and compared: the six-week span of the Fourth Offensive, and the eight weeks immediately preceding the offensive. In many respects, the period of the offensive could be labeled "business as usual" for airpower. Much of the air effort was associated with the vigorous spoiling attacks and preemption campaigns the Allies were continuing on the ground.

The enemy's attacks increased the urgency of some airstrikes, but the overall volume barely budged. Figure 8<sup>38/</sup> shows the total number of strike sorties (less B-52s) and how they were allocated in-country versus out-country, and among the corps. The weekly average of total sorties flown increased almost five percent during the offensive, and the fighter

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and attack aircraft continued the out-country air war at a slightly higher level. The additional sorties that were available in-country were allocated almost exclusively to the two northern corps; I CTZ received an average of 111.3 additional sorties per week, and II CTZ gained an average of 162.6 sorties above its normal weekly ration. In absolute terms, these increases represented only slightly larger slices of the total amount, but the relative impact was much more pronounced--within I CTZ the number of sorties flown rose nearly 8 percent, and in II CTZ air activity jumped 34.5 percent. Still, the enemy offensive produced no gross discontinuities in the allocation of tactical airstrike sorties. The slight surge that did occur might be attributed as much to Allied initiative as well as to that of the enemy.

As opposed to preplanned strike sorties, the number of immediate requests for airstrikes provides an index of the urgency of combat operations. Figure 9<sup>39/</sup> shows the number of immediate airstrikes provided by in-country USAF gunships (AC-47s and AC-119s). Similar data for all other fighter and attack aircraft are shown in Figure 10.<sup>40/</sup> During the period of the offensive, gunship immediates increased 56 percent, while all other immediates rose only 20 percent. Since gunship activity was confined to hours of darkness, the relative increases tended to support what was already known--the enemy showed a marked preference for night attacks.

The greatest increases in immediates came in I and II CTZs. The statistics for I CTZ were somewhat skewed by the unique operations of the



# RESPONSES TO IMMEDIATES IN-COUNTRY AC-47S & AC-119S

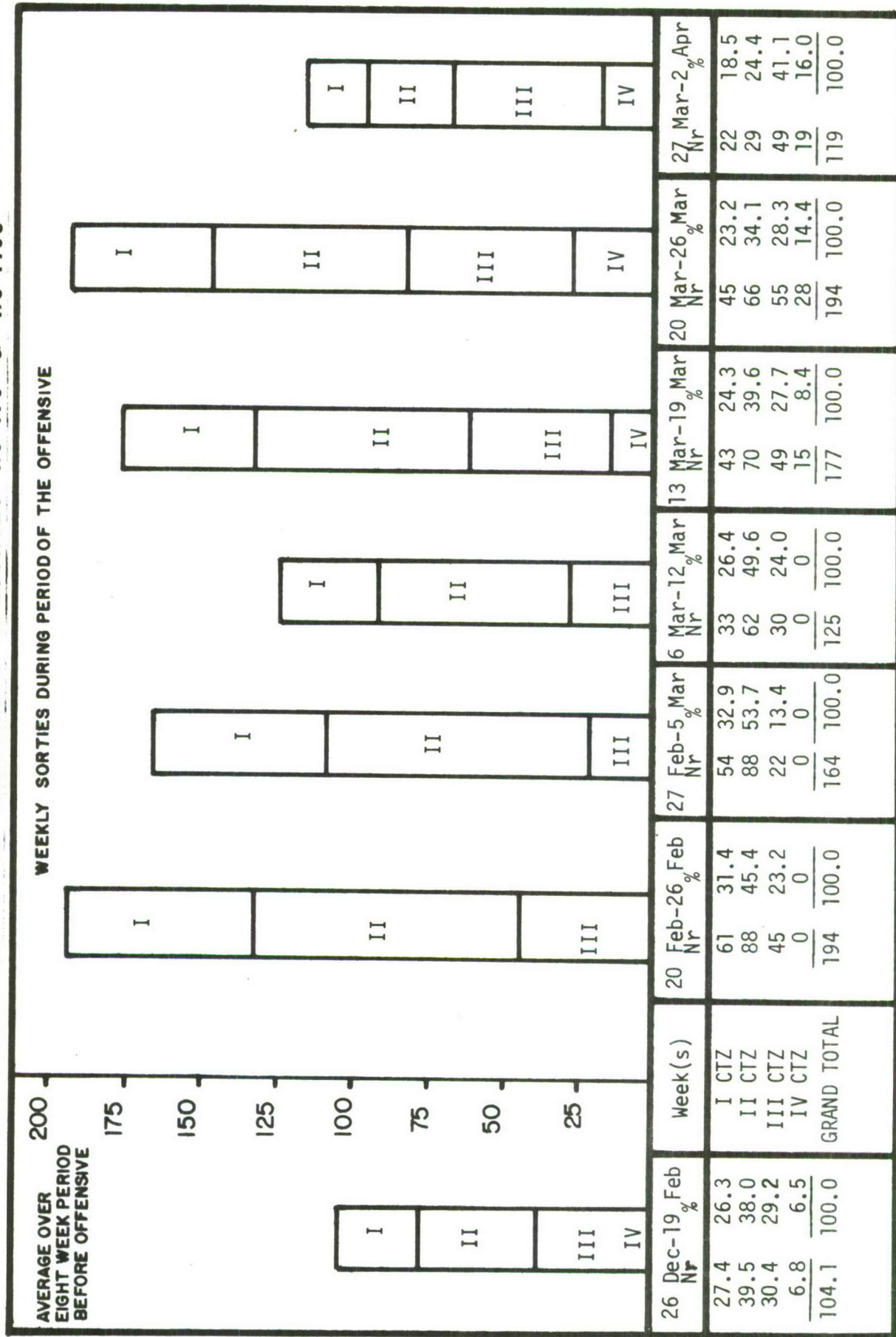


FIGURE 9

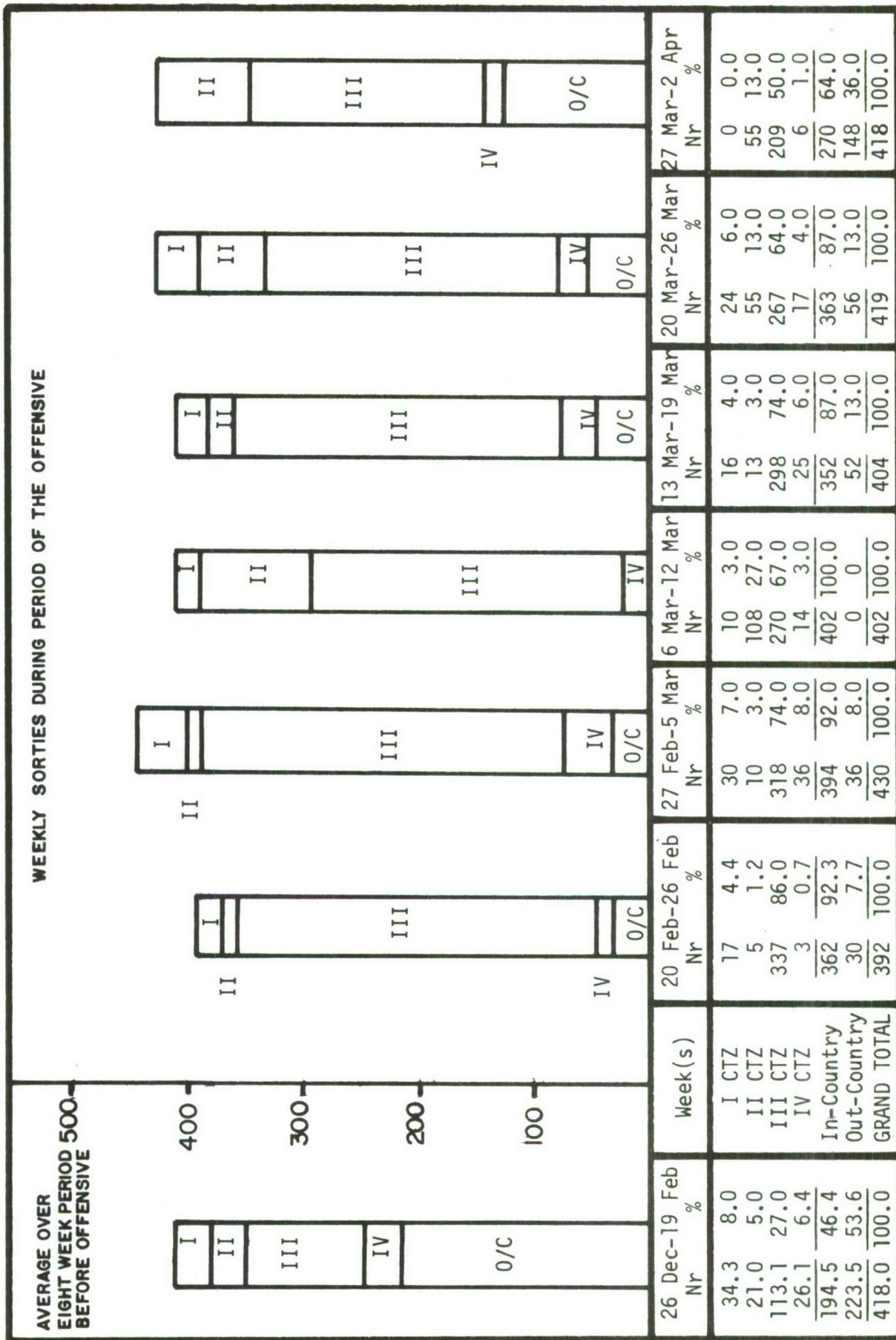


# TACTICAL AIR IMMEDIATE SORTIES USAF & USMC



FIGURE 10

# ARC LIGHT SORTIES



**FIGURE 11**

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1st Marine Air Wing in that area (see Chapter III), and the increases in II CTZ were, again, more relative than absolute. The urgency of operations in IV CTZ was recognized as low, but the rather constant level of immediates in III CTZ was misleading; a massive amount of airpower was shifted into III CTZ, and it came in the biggest parcel of them all--ARC LIGHT.

The B-52 bombing operations, known as ARC LIGHT, were used as a reserve; their weight was shifted dramatically to meet the enemy's main thrust and to blunt his initiative. Before the offensive, ARC LIGHT sorties were being expended in favor of out-country targets (53.6 percent) over in-country targets (46.4 percent). During the offensive, 87 percent of the ARC LIGHT operations were flown in-country (Fig. 11).<sup>41/</sup>

The air response to the Fourth Offensive must not, however, be measured merely by magnitude of change. Throughout the offensive, fighter and attack aircraft continued their front-line duties of interdiction and close support; thus, their heavy contribution to the Allied success was less visible in the limelight of this overview.

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CHAPTER III  
THE FIGHTING IN III CORPS

Saigon and the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex were the ultimate targets for the VC/NVA, and the enemy's plans for a Fourth Offensive included those critical areas as objectives. The infiltration routes (Fig. 12) that the enemy had traditionally used pointed like arrows from base areas and sanctuaries along the Cambodian border toward these two areas. Especially dangerous to the security of the Capital Military District ((CMD), which encompasses Saigon, was the route from the Ba Thu cantonment in the Angel's Wing/Parrot's Beak salient in Cambodia, less than 50 kilometers west of the capital.<sup>1/</sup>

In late 1968, the enemy threatened Saigon with four Divisions: The 1st, 5th, 7th, and 9th (Fig. 12). During the period prior to the Fourth Offensive, they were situated in the border areas along the infiltration routes, and it was axiomatic that the offensive would involve movement of some of them (if not all) along the infiltration routes toward the center of III CTZ.<sup>2/</sup> In addition to the four divisions (containing an average of 5,200 men each), the enemy could call upon various independent regiments and battalions, both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, located throughout the corps area. Allied intelligence estimated that by February 1969, the enemy had a total of 89 maneuver battalions<sup>3/</sup> available for the Fourth Offensive in III CTZ--the largest concentration of VC/NVA strength in South Vietnam.

The enemy ostensibly had the manpower for conducting another Tet

# ENEMY SITUATION IN III CTZ

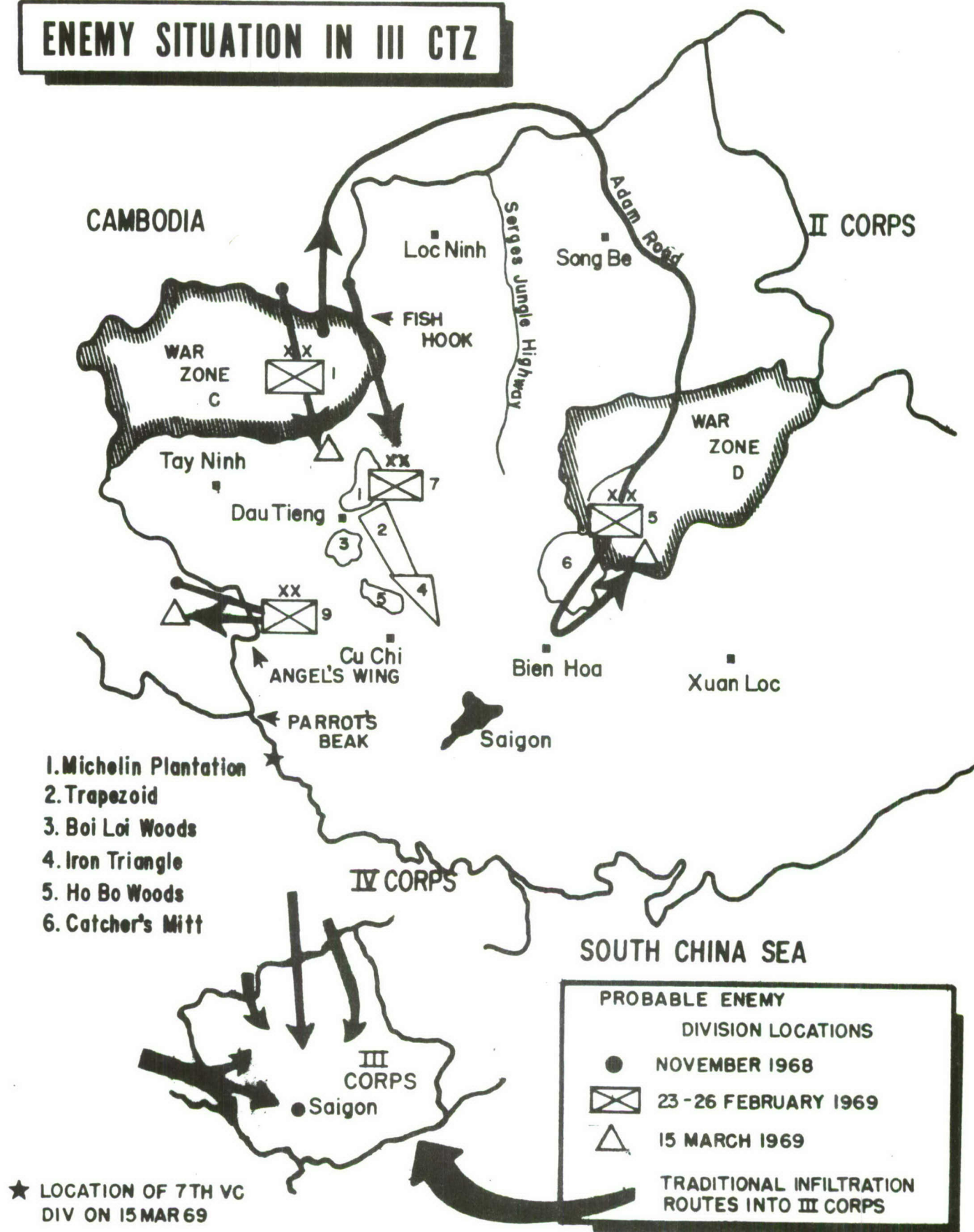


FIGURE 12



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Offensive aimed at Saigon, Bien Hoa/Long Binh, and other population centers in III CTZ. He could also conduct attacks by fire and ground assaults against other targets, both military and civilian, and could interdict friendly lines of communication (LOCs) in the corps. The enemy's offensive plans, however, included some inherent preparatory actions on his part which were subject to Allied preemption. First, he had to move men and supplies from the border areas into the center of the corps. At the same time, the enemy had to preposition supplies in caches along the routes and in base areas with which to sustain the fighting once it started. Next, the enemy needed relatively safe assembly points near the objectives to be assaulted. And finally, he required orderly movement from the assembly areas to the targets in order to have coordinated attacks that would achieve goals of the offensive. These were the enemy's requirements; they were all vital for a successful offensive. If the Allies could preempt them, the offensive would fail.<sup>4/</sup>

The Allied concept of operation for III CTZ was based on a "no-risk" defense of Saigon. From a position of strength in the CMD and along the approaches to the capital, Headquarters II Field Forces Vietnam (Hq II FFV) and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), III Corps deployed the majority of forces in key positions radiating out from the CMD. Along the borders and in remote areas, mobile combat forces conducted screening operations to detect enemy movement toward areas within III CTZ. This reconnaissance was augmented by extensive use of electronic surveillance systems and by programs of ARC LIGHT strikes and artillery interdiction.<sup>5/</sup>

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The Allied troop dispositions in the late fall of 1968 in III CTZ were generally as follows: CMD forces directly defending Saigon, with the 25th, 5th, and 18th ARVN Divisions deployed in tactical areas from west to east a short distance out from Saigon. Complementary Free World Military Assistance Forces (FWMAF) were deployed throughout III CTZ: the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, and the 199th Infantry Brigade were in the western CMD with areas of operations extending out beyond the district boundaries. To the northwest, the 25th Infantry Division was located in Tay Ninh Province across the infiltration routes from Cambodia. The 1st Infantry Division had an area of operations (AO) extending from the CMD north and then east above Saigon, across the approach routes from War Zone D (Fig. 12). In Long An Province, southwest of the CMD, the 1st Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division conducted operations under control of Hq II FFV, while the division's other two brigades were farther south in IV CTZ. The 11th Armored Cavalry was in the Bien Hoa/Long Binh area, and the Royal Thai and Australian forces were situated to the east and southeast of Saigon, respectively.<sup>6/</sup>

The capability of II FFV to deal with the enemy threat was increased in early November 1968 by the movement of the airmobile 1st Cavalry Division from I CTZ to the northern tier of III CTZ (Operation LIBERTY CANYON). Its elements were deployed in a line across the infiltration routes in northern III Corps, giving particular attention to restricting the enemy's movement toward the center of the corps.<sup>7/</sup> The friendly forces in III CTZ totaled 108 maneuver battalions, spread throughout the corps, as against the 89 VC/NVA battalions mentioned previously.<sup>8/</sup> All of the Allied units were conducting aggressive spoiling operations designed to preempt the enemy's Fourth Offensive

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and insure that the VC/NVA could not repeat their success of Tet 1968.<sup>9/</sup> The Air Force continued routine programs of support for the ground operations during the period of November 1968 to January 1969, keeping pace with the Army's preparations for an enemy offensive. As the Tet time-frame neared, air activity was intensified to forestall the major and sustained escalation of the fighting that was predicted.

#### Air Reconnaissance

The intensification of air activity began with an increase in visual reconnaissance (VR) by the Forward Air Controllers (FACs) in III CTZ. During the enemy buildup preceding the 1968 Tet Offensive, many FACs had detected and reported increases in the enemy's movement--specifically, heavy trail use. Plans were made in the last two months of 1968 and in early 1969 for more VR throughout III CTZ in the hope that similar intelligence would be obtained and used to counter the offensive that the VC/NVA were planning.<sup>10/</sup>

Headquarters, 7AF, directed that the Direct Air Support Center in III Corps (III DASC) intensify the VR of the areas around Saigon, Bien Hoa/Long Binh, and War Zone D.<sup>11/</sup> The DASC responded by augmenting the normal effort with two O-2 and five O-1 aircraft. The O-2s were utilized for night coverage of the Bien Hoa VR area, and the O-1s were given to FACs in other critical areas for daytime coverage. Additionally, III DASC was determined to make every effort to increase VR throughout III CTZ, commensurate with aircraft and crew availability.<sup>12/</sup>

The intensified VR program began officially on 14 February 1969, but

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prior to that date, both the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF), on 1 February, and III DASC, on 10 February, began to expand the VR in anticipation of an enemy offensive around the Tet period.<sup>13/</sup> By 14 February, the degree of effort had heightened so that during the second half of the month the total hours flown by FACs in III Corps increased considerably. The CMD was given VR 24 hours per/day, and both the CMD and Bien Hoa/Long Binh were covered by a rocket watch during the night. In addition, the crucial areas were well-covered, and the FACs flew double coverage on all borders and coasts, and concentrated on the infiltration routes and known base areas.<sup>14/</sup>

A considerable amount of infrared surveillance (RED HAZE) was concentrated in the same general areas as the increased VR during the period prior to the Fourth Offensive. The base areas and infiltration routes from Cambodia were covered, as were the assembly areas toward the center of the zone, such as War Zone D. The CMD and the coastal approaches to the capital also received RED HAZE coverage. The USAF infrared surveillance program averaged five targets being flown each night in III CTZ, as the Allies maintained a continuing watch for indications of an offensive aimed at Saigon and the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex.<sup>15/</sup>

#### Allied Operations, November 1968 - February 1969

Although the Allied preemptive measures during November and December 1968 and January 1969 slowed the enemy's redeployment to the south and southeast, they were not able to stop it altogether. The enemy was forced to delay his movements and break up his major units into small groups to infiltrate through the Allied AOs. The loss of vital materiel that was captured and



[REDACTED]

destroyed during the Allied operations forced the enemy to divert manpower to logistical supply and caused him problems in supporting those units already in intermediate areas.<sup>16/</sup> Also, the enemy's reconnaissance units were hindered in their vital missions of scouting and screening to cover movement of major VC/NVA units toward objectives in III CTZ.

Close air support (CAS) in III CTZ during the period of November 1968 through January 1969 totaled 16,738 sorties, 6,479 by VNAF and 10,259 by Free World air.<sup>17/</sup> Fighter aircraft continued to average 100-150 sorties per day. The sorties that were not flown in CAS were directed against the infiltration routes and against staging and supply storage areas, further restricting the movement of the enemy's troops and materiel into critical areas.<sup>18/</sup>

During the same period, 298 separate targets were struck by B-52s in the III CTZ. In November, the ARC LIGHT strikes were concentrated in the northern and western portions of the corps near the Cambodian border, primarily in War Zone C and across the infiltration routes. In December 1968 and January 1969, the Allies noted enemy units moving from the border areas toward the center of III CTZ. It was not known then, but only elements of the VC/NVA 5th Division were succeeding with the infiltration into the intermediate staging areas in preparation for the Fourth Offensive. As the enemy moved in, so did the ARC LIGHT strikes--into the base areas such as the Boi Loi and Ho Bo Woods, the Trapezoid, and Catcher's Mitt (Fig. 12).<sup>19/</sup> Although the broad Allied preemptive measures had not prevented the movement toward the center of III CTZ, they did severely curtail and disrupt it.

[REDACTED]

February 1969

As the Tet time-frame approached, the Allies initiated a series of spoiling operations, the BOWIE WINNERS and KEEP-OUTs, to strike the enemy in his staging areas and prevent his moving additional men and supplies into III CTZ. The KEEP-OUTs (Fig. 13) were area denial operations conducted on 13 and 16 February 1969, employing air-delivered mines in both land and water areas along the Angel's Wing - Parrot's Beak to the west of Saigon. The region had been a traditional infiltration route into III CTZ for both troops and supplies, beginning in a large cantonment complex in Cambodia and extending eastward to Saigon. Laced with canals, marshes, and occasional patches of dry land, the area is one in which ground operations and ambushes are relatively difficult. The tempo of enemy activity in the area had been increasing, so the KEEP-OUTs were planned to counter the trend and hopefully <sup>20/</sup> to help stop the flow of men and materiel necessary for an offensive.

The concept of operations for KEEP-OUT I and II included the seeding of selected trails and dry land areas with CBU-34s (Antipersonnel mines) and the waterways with MK-36 mines. Under the direction of FACs, F-100s of the 31st Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) were to place the CBU-34s into the target zones and as soon as this was done, F-4s from the 12th TFW were to plant the MK-36 <sup>21/</sup> mines in the water routes.

On 12 February, the participating FACs and strike flight leaders were briefed by the II FFV Air Liaison Officer (ALO). The concept of operations, the tactics to be employed, and the strike procedures were explained to



# OPERATIONS IN III CTZ

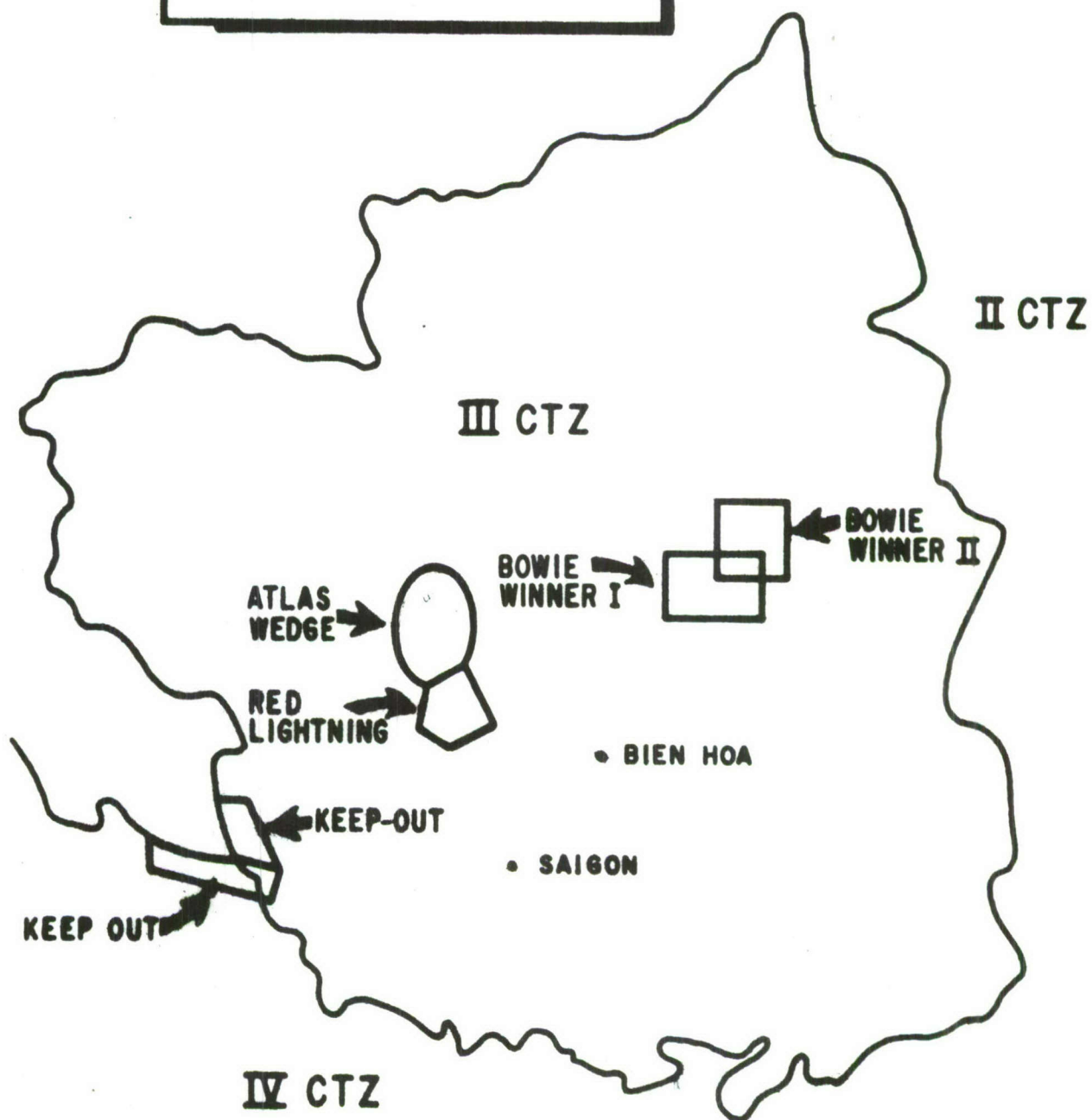


FIGURE 13

[REDACTED]

insure that all the participants knew exactly what was expected of them. <sup>22/</sup>

Late the next afternoon, KEEP-OUT I began with the placing of the CBU-34s followed by the MK-36s. The plans called for a reseeding operation to take place on the morning of 16 February. The FACs again directed the fighters in placing the munitions, and by noon, KEEP-OUT I was completed. <sup>23/</sup>

KEEP-OUT II was essentially the same as KEEP-OUT I, but in a different area and with a different method of ordnance delivery to lessen the time involved. Later, on 19 February, and again on 21 March, two similar operations--KEEP-OUT III and KEEP-OUT IV were initiated in the same general area. <sup>24/</sup>

The results of KEEP-OUT I and II were not immediately discernible. While there was evidence of MK-36 detonations, there was no information regarding the effectiveness of the CBU-34. Enemy activity was noted in the areas that had been seeded, but ground operations were not planned into the region to assess the results. <sup>25/</sup>

BOWIE WINNER I (Fig. 13) directed airstrikes and artillery against the enemy staging area in southeastern War Zone D on 15 February. Intelligence and reconnaissance sources indicated that advanced elements of the VC/NVA 5th Division were located there in January 1969, and the enemy buildup was expected to continue, reaching a peak by the middle of February. <sup>26/</sup> The operation was designed to destroy the massed enemy soldiers and supplies, and to upset the enemy's timetable for attack to the south.

The concept of operations for BOWIE WINNER I featured the delivery of



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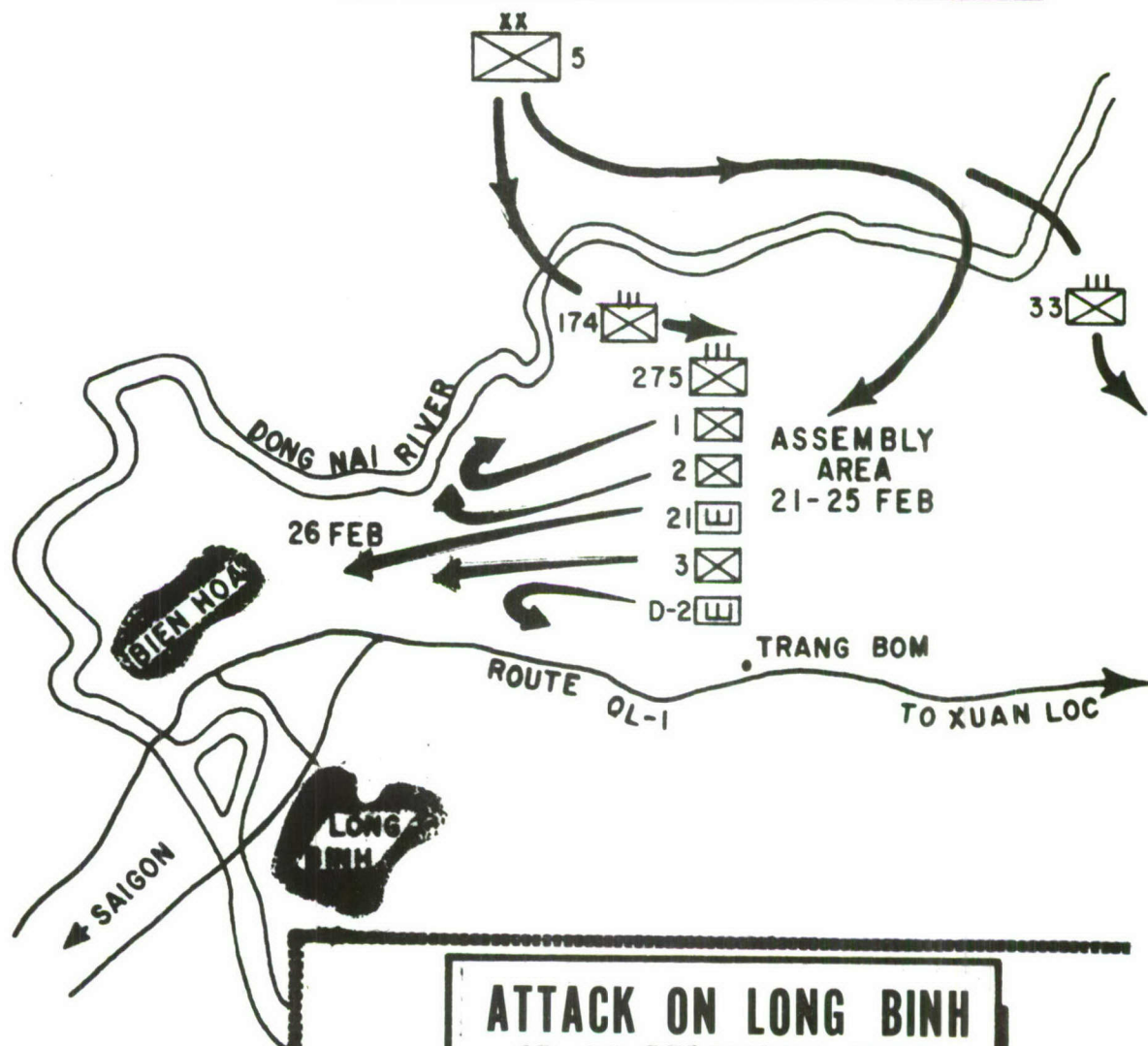
CBU-28 (DRAGON TOOTH) mines against the area, along with CS-2 persistent gas brought in by Army helicopters, all under the direction of FACs.<sup>27/</sup> Then, ten ARC LIGHT strikes were scheduled against base camps and suspected troop concentrations, followed by CBU-49 delayed-fuze bomblets seeded into the strike boxes via the COMBAT SKY SPOT (CSS) technique.<sup>28/</sup>

Prestrike preparations were carried out on 13 and 14 February. The operation began early on the 15th with the delivery of the CBU-28s, followed closely by the CS-2 brought in by Army helicopters. The FACs marked the targets for the gas, although they had little previous experience working with Army helicopters. There were no difficulties, however, with this phase of BOWIE WINNER I, but the FACs did find it difficult to wear helmets over the required gas masks. Also, one FAC encountered the gas at 1,500 feet above ground level (AGL), but climbed to a higher altitude and continued with his mission. The strike pilots, on the other hand, did not report detecting any of the gas in their aircraft while delivering ordnance in or through the gassed areas.<sup>29/</sup>

The CBU-28s and CS-2 deliveries ended late in the afternoon of 15 February. Shortly thereafter, alternating ARC LIGHT strikes and CBU-49 strikes began and continued throughout the night, ending just before daylight. Then, additional ARC LIGHT sorties were flown and the last CBU-28s were expended, completing BOWIE WINNER I.<sup>30/</sup>

Allied commanders decided to carry out another such operation immediately in the same general area, but a little farther to the east. Since the new

# ATTACKS ON BIEN HOA & LONG BINH



## ATTACK ON LONG BINH 23-25 FEBRUARY 1969

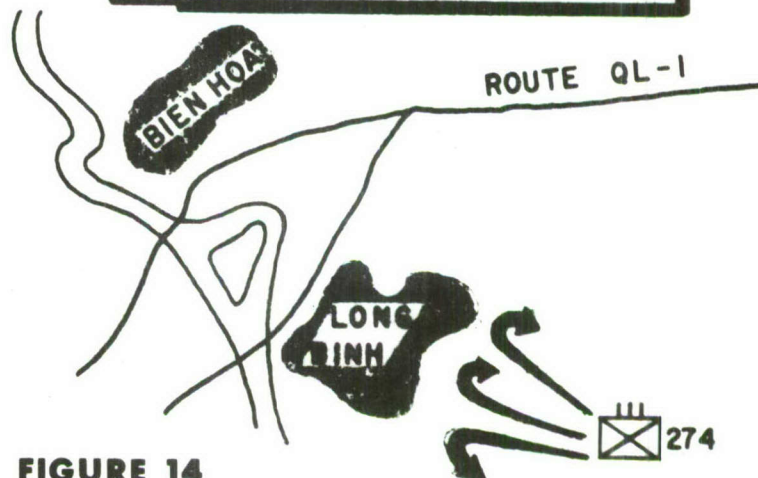


FIGURE 14



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operation--BOWIE WINNER II--was basically the same as the previous one, and much of the original plan was applicable, it was possible to execute the operation a short time after the decision was made to proceed.<sup>31/</sup> Because of the increasing buildup of intelligence concerning the area, Allied commanders also decided to expend two ARC LIGHT strikes on lucrative targets before the main operation was executed. Believing that the enemy would enter the ARC LIGHT boxes once BOWIE WINNER II began, the decision was made to cover the two strikes with CBU-49 delayed-fuze bomblets.<sup>32/</sup>

BOWIE WINNER II was begun on the morning of the 21st, when the first missions expending CBU-28s were flown, followed by the CS-2. In the afternoon, more CBU-28s were expended and ARC LIGHT strikes took place, continuing until 0445 hours on the 22nd. Each ARC LIGHT was covered during the night by fighters delivering CBU-28/49s on CSS missions. In mid-morning, additional CBU-28 deliveries began, lasting until the end of the operation that afternoon.<sup>33/</sup>

After BOWIE WINNER I and II ended, post-strike BDA by the FACs and ground troops revealed a number of fortifications destroyed and secondary fires and explosions. However, the immediate BDA did not reveal the total impact of the operations, for later reports indicated that they markedly disrupted the enemy attack on Bien Hoa/Long Binh.<sup>34/</sup>

#### The Fourth Offensive

Some of the heaviest fighting during the enemy's Fourth Offensive took place in the Bien Hoa/Long Binh area (Fig.14) between 23 and 26 February.



[REDACTED]

The fighting was anticlimactic; what had been planned and anticipated were coordinated assaults on the critical areas in III CTZ by major enemy units during the Tet time-frame. What actually took place was something else--<sup>35/</sup> the VC/NVA could not achieve the success they had hoped for.

The enemy planned to attack the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex with elements of the 5th Division supported by at least two separate regiments. According to intelligence sources, the attack plan divided the complex into two parts, the dividing line being Highway QL-1 running from between the two installations to the east toward Xuan Loc. The northern part contained Bien Hoa city and the Air Base which were objectives of the 5th Division; in the southern portion, the Long Binh Post was to be attacked by two regiments under the direction of the enemy's Military Region 7.<sup>36/</sup>

The 275th VC Regiment and the 174th NVA Regiment drew the assignments of attacking the Bien Hoa Air Base (BHAB) from the east and north, respectively, while the 5th Division's other regiment, the 33d, would move out of War Zone D to the east, possibly to exploit any part of the plan that proved successful. The attack plan south of Highway QL-1 included an assault on the Long Binh Post by the 274th VC Regiment and supporting units, possibly with help from the 33d Regiment off to the east. The enemy's remaining regiment, 95A, was to occupy a blocking and reserve role in the VC U-1 Province some distance farther away to the east.<sup>37/</sup>

During the last two months of 1968, Allied Commanders in III CTZ had intensified their defensive efforts around Bien Hoa/Long Binh. In November,



[REDACTED]

they had organized a Bien Hoa Tactical Area Command (BHTAC) to coordinate all efforts in defense of the complex.<sup>38/</sup> Bien Hoa Air Base itself received special attention. In December, Maj. Gen. Richardson, Deputy Commanding General, II FFV, and the Commander of the Base Security Police Squadron, assessed the base defenses, the result of which was the transfer of an Armored Cavalry troop to the control of the Security Police for perimeter defense. The unit had Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) equipped with 20-mm VULCAN cannon, and M-551 tanks (Sheridans) armed with 152-mm cannon. These, along with two helicopters provided informally by the Commanding Officer of the Army's 145th Aviation Battalion, aided greatly in base defense when the enemy finally appeared.<sup>39/</sup>

The elements of the 5th VC Division prepared to initiate the attack on Bien Hoa on the night of 22-23 February, but as the movement to the objectives began, the enemy's units ran into trouble. The 174th VC Regiment met resistance to the north, could not penetrate, and turned back. The 33d NVA Regiment started toward the south, was engaged by artillery fire and B-52 strikes and was driven off.<sup>40/</sup> The remaining attack regiment, the 275th, with attached Sappers, was ultimately the only enemy unit that approached its objective--the story of what happened to this regiment is the story of the "Battle of Bien Hoa".

The 275th Regiment had remained in southern War Zone D until the night of 20 February when it crossed the Dong Nai River, and moved to an assembly area eight kilometers north of Trang Bom. There it prepared for the attack

[REDACTED]

which was supposed to take place on the night of 22-23 February. Elements <sup>41/</sup> of the regiment, with attached units, were given the following tasks:

- Headquarters, 275th - Control the operation from a position seven and one-half kilometers east of Bien Hoa Air Base.
- 1/275th - Attack Bien Hoa Air Base from the east, concentrating on the helipad and billeting areas.
- 2/275th - Enter Bien Hoa Air Base from the south, attack the base headquarters, destroy the ammunition dump, the POL area, and all aircraft.
- 3/275th - Occupy two hamlets to the east and attack ARVN units in that area; hold a line between the two hamlets against expected Allied reaction forces. (It was also expected to extend VC/NVA control into Bien Hoa City.)
- 21st Sapper-Reconnaissance Battalion - Attack III Corps Headquarters following a barrage by 107-mm rockets.
- D-2 Sapper Battalion and a company of 1/275th - Attack the Bien Hoa Prisoner-of-War (PW) Camp to the east of the base.

On the night of the scheduled attack, however, the units did not move into the assault positions. Reportedly, the attack was postponed because of the enemy's concern over the disclosure of the attack plan by a knowledgeable platoon leader who had rallied to the GVN on 17 February. <sup>42/</sup>

Despite the delay in the main assault, BHAB received an ABF on the night of 22-23 February, which resulted in two aircraft destroyed, eight damaged, and a large amount of other materiel destroyed or damaged. <sup>43/</sup> Also there is evidence that some units targeted against Bien Hoa Air Base from the south attempted a ground probe, or attempted to carry out a portion of the planned main assault. Between 0200 hours and 0300 hours on the morning of 23 February,



[REDACTED]

a patrol from the Security Police Squadron was checking the base perimeter in the southeast just after the initial attack by fire. The patrol spotted movement just outside the concertina wire, and the watchtowers on the southeastern portion of the base began to receive small-arms fire from a row of houses outside the base nicknamed "Turkey Row". The area was illuminated and seven men were observed coming out of a house on "Turkey Row" toward the base perimeter. They were taken under fire at once as were the probable sources of the incoming small-arms fire. The men fled back to the house. A short time later, perhaps three or four minutes, perimeter guards saw what appeared to be the VC/NVA setting up a heavy weapons position to the rear of "Turkey Row". The Commander of the 3d Security Police Squadron moved one of the U.S. Army Sheridan M-551 tanks into action and engaged the VC/NVA with 152-mm cannon fire. Army helicopters were also on the scene, and the tremendous volume of firepower from all defending forces totally destroyed the enemy position. At least one opinion has been advanced that this firepower turned back an attack by an enemy sapper unit, possibly one of those units that had not been notified of the postponement of the main assault.<sup>44/</sup>

During the incident on the night of 22-23 February, the versatility of the FACs was graphically demonstrated. The III DASC radio room had been forced to move underground due to the enemy's attack-by-fire. The new location severely limited its long-range capability. A FAC on station above Bien Hoa relayed all radio transmissions from the DASC, in addition to his normal duties. The FAC also supported an outpost under attack in the immediate area with his rockets until a Spooky (AC-47) could be sent to the scene.<sup>45/</sup>

[REDACTED]

Following the route of the enemy in the rear of "Turkey Row", sporadic small-arms and automatic weapons fire continued. At 0700 hours, the firing stopped and the ARVN 23d Defense Force Group swept "Turkey Row", while the 3d Security Police Squadron checked the southern perimeter. Both operations yielded negative results.<sup>46/</sup>

The main attack elements of the 275th Regiment remained dispersed north of Trang Bom from 21-25 February awaiting orders. They were not detected by the increased Allied VR. Finally, on the 25th, they received new instructions-- they were to move that same night to an assembly area three kilometers north of Ho Nai. From there, the VC/NVA were to launch their attack on the morning of the 26th.<sup>47/</sup>

The movement toward the objective began. During the night the attacking force was further reduced. A portion of the 1st Battalion was ordered to stay with the regimental headquarters as a reserve. The remainder of the battalion, along with the D-2 Sapper Battalion, was either diverted or got lost and did not appear at Bien Hoa Air Base on the 26th. The 2d Battalion suffered a similar fate--for some reason it also failed to show up in the action that followed. Out of all of the units originally targeted against BHAB, only the 3d Battalion, 275th Regiment, and the 21st Sapper-Reconnaissance Battalion proceeded on their missions as planned.<sup>48/</sup>

At 0300 hours, 26 February, this force was spotted by Security Policemen on the eastern perimeter of the base, and a short time later, by a sentry in the 101st Airborne Division cantonment. As one source said, "They blew



[REDACTED]

the whistle--and the war was on!"<sup>49/</sup>

The Allied forces immediately engaged the VC/NVA. Later in the morning, fighting became widespread to the east of the base perimeter as the enemy split up in response to Allied pressure. BHAB itself received small-arms/automatic weapons (SA/AW) fire from several locations to the east, but a torrent of fire from the base's armored vehicles, small-arms, and a 90-mm recoilless rifle kept the enemy harassment at a low level.<sup>50/</sup>

As the Allies conducted operations to fix and destroy the enemy, the fighting became centered around two villages to the east, Dong Lach and Ho Nai. As soon as the enemy's occupation of the villages was recognized, the Allied forces surrounded them and prepared to finish the enemy off, but first an attempt was made to get the civilians out of the area. The ARVN brought a vehicle equipped with a loudspeaker up to the battle area and called upon the villagers to evacuate. The ARVN also broadcast an appeal to the VC/NVA from one of their captured officers to "Chieu Hoi" (rally to the government), which some 60 enemy soldiers subsequently did.<sup>51/</sup>

The ARVN III Corps Commander, General Tri, had held off the destruction of the villages as long as possible, but by later afternoon he decided to strike into the houses, so the enemy wouldn't escape after dark.<sup>52/</sup> The attacks in and around the villages began in earnest, supported by USAF and VNAF strike aircraft, and light fire teams controlled by the respective FACs. Two FACs on station above the area directed U.S. fighters, F-100s and F-4s, in expending their ordnance, some of which was placed as close as 350 meters

[REDACTED]

from the end of the main runway at Bien Hoa Air Base.<sup>53/</sup> The Vietnamese A-1s also struck at the enemy; these were controlled by a VNAF FAC in an APC near the scene of the fighting.<sup>54/</sup> The Allies continued to make use of the loudspeaker and alternated airstrikes with Psychological Warfare broadcasts.<sup>55/</sup>

By 1900 hours on 26 February, the "Battle of Bien Hoa" was over. The enemy's reinforced 3d Battalion, 275th Regiment, was destroyed, and those soldiers not killed or captured tried to evade the Allied noose by exfiltrating to the east. The total results of the battle were as follows: the enemy lost 276 KIA and 66 captured; 100 individual and 40 crew-served weapons were captured along with a goodly amount of equipment and munitions.<sup>56/</sup>

In concert with the enemy's attack at Bien Hoa, he also moved against Long Binh Post. The attack began at 0230 hours on 23 February when the Post received 78 rounds of mixed rocket/mortar fire and a weak ground probe by elements of the 274th VC Regiment. Although the ABF caused some damage, the ground probe did not succeed in penetrating the installation. Later that same morning, Royal Thai forces engaged an estimated VC company in a bunker complex four kilometers south of Long Binh. Fifty-six of the enemy's troops were killed, all by the supporting tactical fighter aircraft. Just as this contact was ending, another enemy unit directed small-arms fire at the post perimeter. The Allies reacted swiftly, engaged the enemy with reinforcements and struck at him from the air. The contact lasted until about 1545 hours, and cost the enemy 158 killed and six PWs.<sup>57/</sup>



[REDACTED]

Prisoner interrogations and searches of enemy bodies at Long Binh revealed the length to which the enemy had gone in preparing his troops for the attack on the post. It seems that the assault forces expected an easy time of it--they had been told by their commanders that the installation contained only "clerks and typists", but no combat troops. The captured enemy soldiers reported they had also been promised as much food as they wanted from C-Ration stocks which they expected to capture. The latter was borne out by the discovery of many can openers on the persons of those troops killed and captured.<sup>58/</sup>

On the 24th, there were small clashes to the south and on the 25th the Allies assaulted a bunker complex in the area. There was also an incident near the PW compound at the post, but no decisive fighting developed. For all intents and purposes, the Long Binh portion of the larger battle was over on the 25th,<sup>59/</sup> for the fighting that took place to the north and east was considered part of the "Battle of Bien Hoa".

The enemy's Fourth Offensive and the "Battle of Bien Hoa" received widespread attention in the U.S. press. An example of the distorted coverage given to the offensive and, specifically, the fighting at Bien Hoa/Long Binh, appeared in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on 26 February. The article read, in part:

*"REDS SEIZE TWO SUBURBS OF SAIGON, REPEL 2000 IN HOUSE-TO-HOUSE FIGHTS: AIR BASE HOLDS OFF ATTACKERS.*

*"Communist raiders seized two villages on Saigon's northern fringes today and turned back 2000 Allied soldiers in house-to-house fighting. United States divebombers and artillery*

[REDACTED]

left the battlefield aflame.

*"American and South Vietnamese tanks were counter-attacking the guerrillas in Dong Lach and Ho Nai, just outside the huge U.S. Air Base at Bien Hoa, 15 miles northeast of Saigon.*

*"The fighting began just at dawn today, opening the fourth day of nation-wide Red offensive which, U.S. spokesmen said, has left at least 3000 enemy dead and about 200 Americans and 417 South Vietnamese killed...."*

During the period of 22 February to 1 March 1969, the VC/NVA carried out an increased number of ABF, and limited ground actions in the remainder of III CTZ. In the heart of the zone, Saigon took nine 122-mm rocket rounds, a minor probe in the city's 9th Precinct, and a few terrorist incidents. In the northwest, Tay Ninh Province experienced ABFs and ground probes against Allied installations. Fire Support Base (FSB) Diamond, southwest of Tay Ninh City, was attacked by the enemy resulting in 206 VC/NVA KIA. The Dau Tieng Base Camp received ABF, with ground probes, as did the Cu Chi Base Camp of the 25th Infantry Division.<sup>60/</sup> The period was characterized by similar activity in other sections of III CTZ, with 299 enemy-initiated incidents occurring compared with 47 the week before. Of these, 144 were ABFs.<sup>61/</sup>

After the 23-26 February period, the enemy's Fourth Offensive lost its momentum. During ABFs, attempted LOC interdiction, and terrorism became the VC/NVA's main tactics, although a few ground assaults of note took place during March.

Two of these ground attacks took place at Landing Zone (LZ) Grant in western Tay Ninh Province.<sup>62/</sup> The first one was carried out by two enemy



[REDACTED]

battalions on 8 March, and resulted in 157 enemy KIA and two PWs. The second assault, on 11 March, was initiated by a single VC/NVA battalion which lost 86 KIA and four PWs. On the Allied side, these attacks caused 16 KIA, 50 WIA, and one 155-mm Howitzer destroyed.

Toward the end of March, on the 24th, the VC/NVA also attacked two ARVN battalions in Long Khanh Province, losing 190 KIA. Later, on the 30th, the enemy assaulted an ARVN night defense position in Tay Ninh Province, resulting in 35 enemy KIA and one PW.<sup>63/</sup> As the month of April began, the Fourth Offensive was clearly over. Allied intelligence sources indicated the enemy's units were retiring to base areas and avoiding, for the most part, contact with Allied forces. As of 31 March, the enemy appeared to be evaluating the effects of the Fourth Offensive and deciding on future courses of action.<sup>64/</sup>

#### Red Lightning, Atlas Wedge, Project DART

RED LIGHTNING and ATLAS WEDGE, two major spoiling operations of the Allies, continued during March, along with Project DART. Operation RED LIGHTNING (Fig. 13) was targeted against a concentration of VC/NVA troops and supplies in the Trapezoid area. Intelligence sources indicated the enemy was there in force, so Allied commanders decided to destroy or inflict heavy casualties on the enemy's troops.<sup>65/</sup>

RED LIGHTNING began on the morning of 10 March with the delivery of CBU-24s (a cluster bomblet identical to CBU-49, but without delay fuzing), and then ARC LIGHT strikes were flown. At 1330 hours, Army CH-47s began

[REDACTED]

the delivery of CS under FAC direction. Later, the ARC LIGHT boxes were seeded with CBU-24/49s and artillery fire was directed into the area. Additional CBU sorties followed and, at first light on 13 March, ground units from the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions began sweep operations.<sup>66/</sup>

RED LIGHTNING resulted in 436 bunkers and fighting positions destroyed and 103 secondary explosions. In addition, 8,000 pounds of rice were destroyed, along with a vast amount of equipment. The post-strike VR by FACs on the ARC LIGHT boxes revealed 9 VC/NVA killed-by-air, pots and pans scattered throughout the area, and indications of heavy foot traffic in the area. The results from the sweep operations were not immediately available.<sup>67/</sup>

ATLAS WEDGE (Fig. 13) was planned to find and destroy elements of the 7th NVA Division and the 96th NVA Artillery Regiment which were reportedly in the Michelin Plantation area. The operation began on 17 March with Allied ground units closing the area and fighters delivering strikes into the plantation. (ARC LIGHT was not allowed within the plantation for political reasons.)<sup>68/</sup>

Initially, 22 ARC LIGHT strikes were expended in an arc around the northern portion of the operation. As ATLAS WEDGE continued, the CG, II FFV, ordered increased targeting to take advantage of the enemy's disrupted condition and to catch the units that had fled the plantation. Ten more ARC LIGHTs were flown in the south and, as the enemy sought refuge toward the Cambodian border, 35 were expended on known base camps and suspected rallying points in that direction.<sup>69/</sup> Allied ground units pulled out of the plantation on the 28th, ostensibly because the operation was completed. Then on



[REDACTED]

the 30th, a four-battalion force swept back into the area and caught some of the enemy's soldiers who had either returned or come out of hiding, adding to the total casualties for the operation.<sup>70/</sup>

The confirmed body count for ATLAS WEDGE was 444. Food, many weapons, and other equipment were destroyed or captured. The total effect was not known, however, because BDA for a significant part of the territory struck by ARC LIGHT was not obtainable.<sup>71/</sup> An intangible result of ATLAS WEDGE, however, was obvious--no longer could the enemy count on the Michelin Plantation as a haven.

Project Deployable Automatic Relay Terminal (DART)<sup>72/</sup> was designed to monitor vehicular and personnel movement in critical areas and to provide the information to Allied forces for interdiction efforts. The system was made up of three basic elements; the sensors, an airborne relay link, and the central DART facility. The sensors were emplaced across infiltration and supply routes and were activated by the enemy as he transited the area. This information was sent to the airborne relay link (an EC-121 on station, orbiting some distance away), which passed the data to the DART facility for interpretation and evaluation. The facility then fed the data to Allied agencies, which carried out various measures to deal with the source the sensors had originally detected.<sup>73/</sup>

The DART system arrived in South Vietnam in early 1969 and became operational in III CTZ on 1 March. Although it came too late to have an effect on the enemy's Fourth Offensive, the system, according to one source, held great promise for future preemptive and interdiction efforts.<sup>74/</sup>

[REDACTED]

CHAPTER IV  
THE ACTION IN I CORPS

The low level of intensity of the enemy's Fourth Offensive indicates the Allied forces in the I Corps Tactical Zone carried out successful programs of preemption and interdiction prior to and during the offensive. An investigation of these programs revealed that aggressive Allied operations, both air and ground, complemented each other with the desired effect--the enemy had trouble moving men and supplies into forward positions and could not gain a sustained offensive posture.<sup>1/</sup>

The Enemy

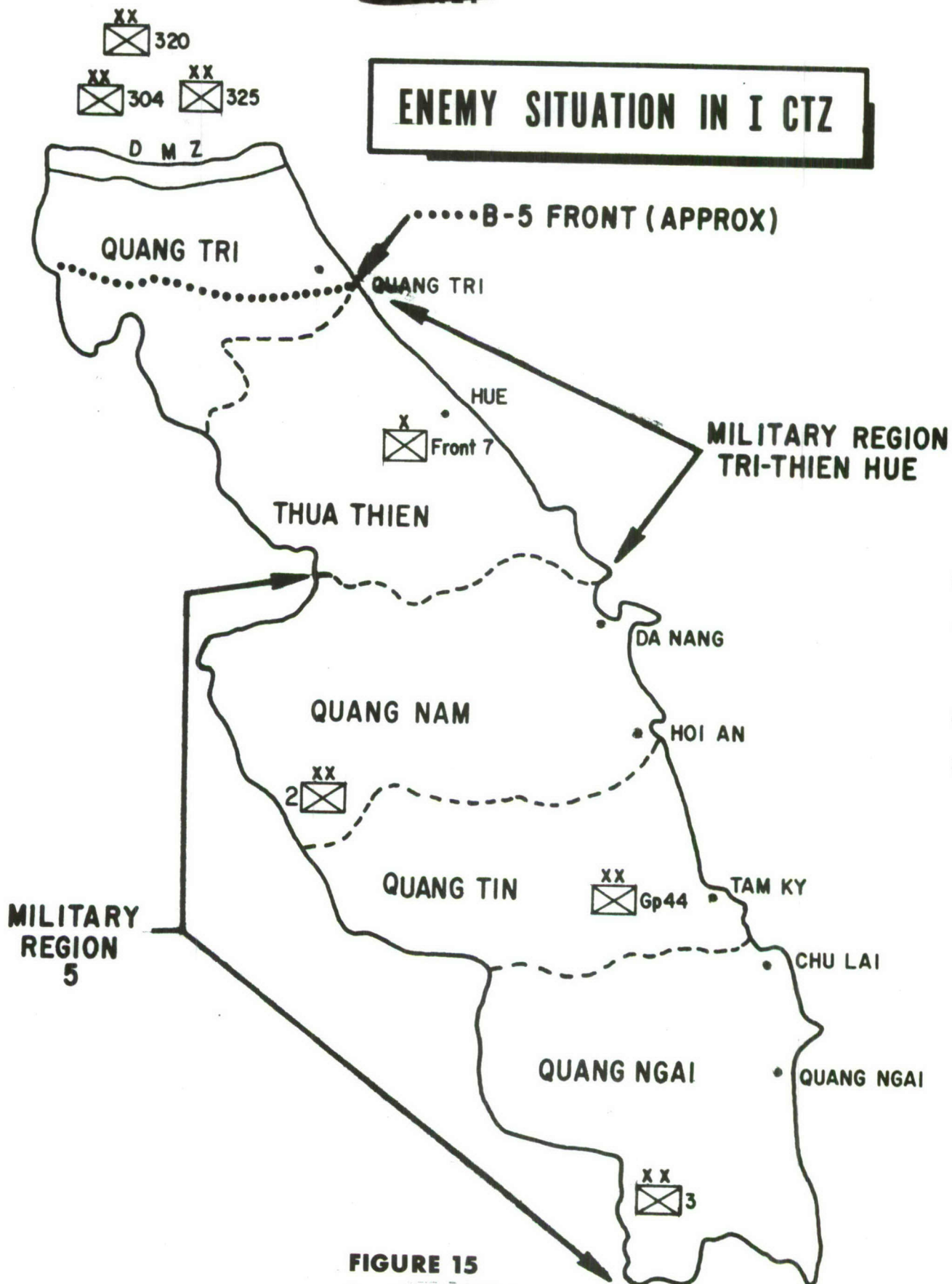
Major units of the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese were generally positioned as shown in Figure 15: the northern portion of the I CTZ, including the DMZ was designated the B-5 Front and contained the 340th, 320th, and 325th NVA Divisions, located across the DMZ. The B-5 Front was under the direct control of Headquarters, North Vietnamese Army.<sup>2/</sup>

The middle portion of I CTZ was designated by the enemy as the Military Region Tri-Thien Hue (MRTTH) and was under the operational control (OpCon) of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the supreme Viet Cong headquarters. MRTTH controlled Front 7, a brigade-size headquarters, and nine infantry regiments operating independently.<sup>3/</sup>

The lower part of the zone, also under the control of COSVN, was designated as Military Region 5 (MR-5). The major units that were OpCon to



**ENEMY SITUATION IN I CTZ**



**FIGURE 15**

# ALLIED SITUATIONS IN I CTZ

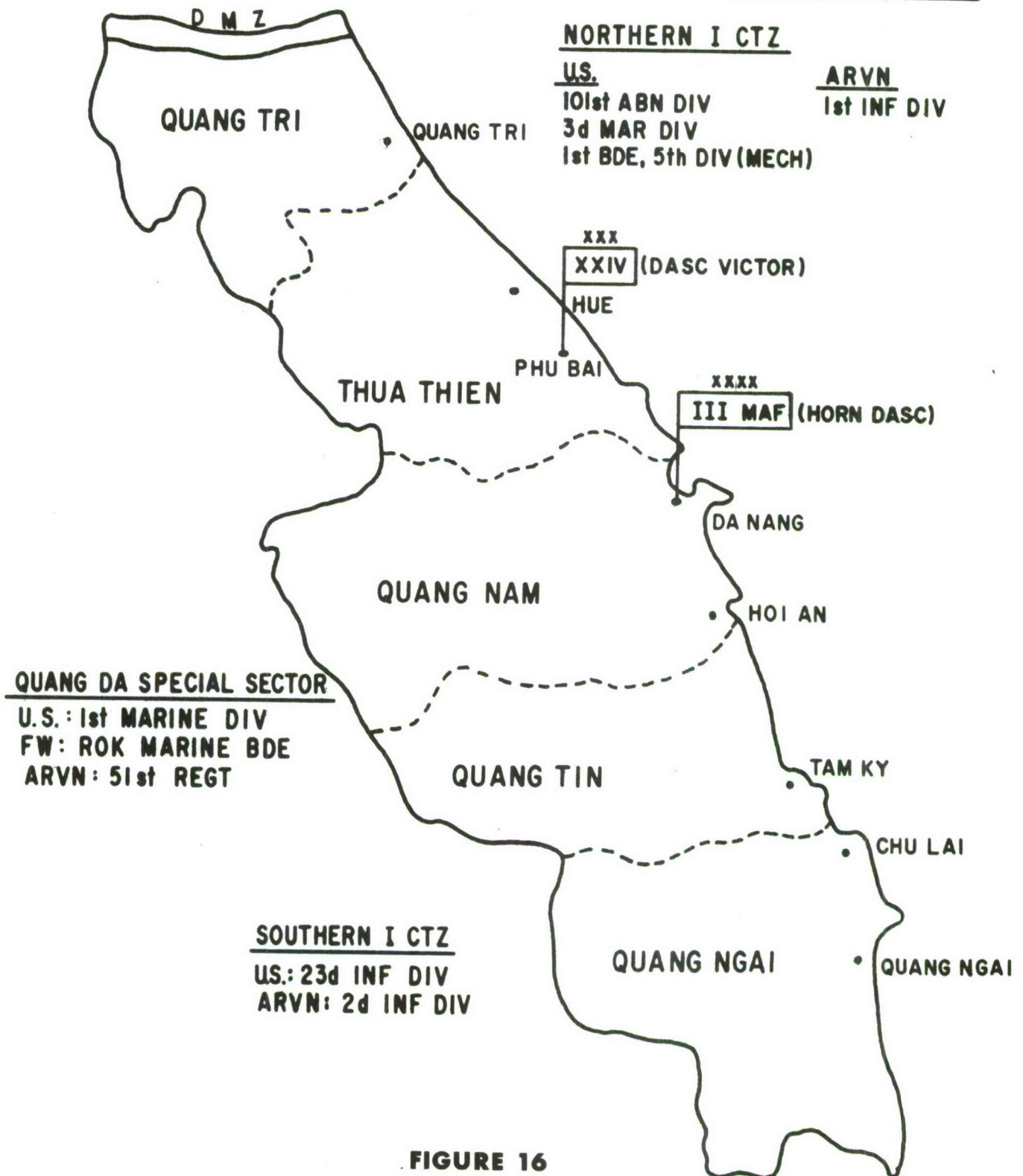


FIGURE 16



[REDACTED]

MR-5 included the 2d and 3d NVA Divisions, another division-size unit, designated Group 44 (GP-44), plus independent artillery and sapper regiments.<sup>4/</sup>

Enemy offensive plans required his moving major units into attack positions in the coastal portion of I CTZ, where most of the population centers and lucrative targets were located. Before attacking, his widely scattered units had to be brought together in assembly areas from which the assaults could be made. Other important enemy requirements were the prepositioning of supplies to support an offensive and the maintenance of relatively secure lines of communications (LOCs) for the movement of his men and equipment either from the DMZ to the south, or from the base areas in Laos toward the east.<sup>5/</sup> The enemy needed all of these ingredients for a successful offensive, and conversely, they became objectives for Allied spoiling operations and interdiction efforts.

#### The Allies

The Allied posture in the I CTZ (Fig. 16) was unique--there were United States Army, United States Marine Corps (USMC), and Republic of Korea (ROK) ground troops under the command of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), in addition to the ARVN forces under the Republic's I Corps command. The northern portion of I CTZ was the responsibility of the U.S. XXIV Corps, with operational control over the 101st Airborne Division, the 3d Marine Division, and a brigade of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). Quang Nam Province, in the center of I CTZ, was designated as the Quang Da Special Sector (QDSS) and included the 1st Marine Division and the ROK Marine Brigade, while the

[REDACTED]

southern two provinces were the responsibility of the brigades of the U.S. 23d Infantry Division (Americal). ARVN units in the I CTZ included the 1st Infantry Division in the north, the 51st Regiment in Quang Nam Province, and the 2d Infantry Division to the south, with Regional Force/Popular Force organizations and Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) forces positioned throughout the corps.<sup>6/</sup>

### Ground Operations

The XXIV Corps Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) in the north was the scene of aggressive spoiling operations prior to Tet 1969 (Fig. 17). In the northwest, SCOTLAND II began in early 1968 and continued until February 1969, while in the southeast, NEVADA EAGLE was run concurrently. Both were reconnaissance-in-force (RIF) operations designed to locate and destroy enemy troops, supply caches, and base areas, and to interdict his LOCs.<sup>7/</sup>

In the middle portion of I CTZ, TAYLOR COMMON began on 7 December 1968 and was terminated on 8 March 1969. It had as its goal the destruction of enemy caches and installations in a base area along the approaches to the Da Nang complex in Quang Nam Province.<sup>8/</sup>

In the southern province, Quang Ngai, operations were also initiated to preempt the enemy's offensive plans. VERNON LAKE II was carried out from 1 November 1968 to 28 February 1969 against elements of the 3d NVA Division, while other units throughout the area conducted smaller search and clear missions. Additionally, the Batangan Peninsula drew significant Allied attention when Operation BOLD MARINER/RUSSELL BEACH/LIEN KIET 9 took place in



**SECRET**

# ALLIED SPOILING OPERATIONS IN I CTZ

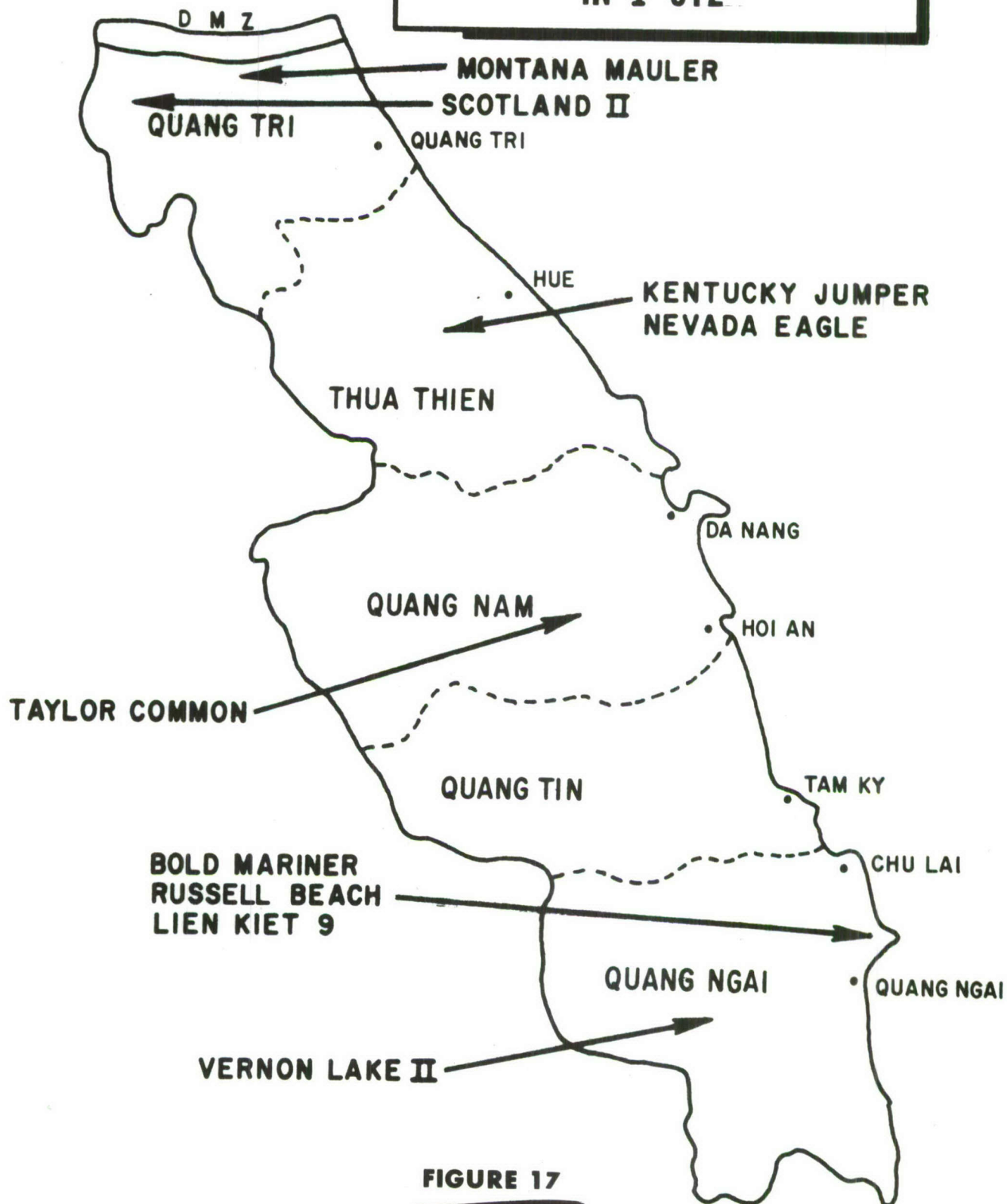


FIGURE 17

**SECRET**

[REDACTED]

January and February 1969 with the object of clearing and holding that area and denying its use to the enemy.<sup>9/</sup>

### Allied Airpower

Historically, I CTZ had been "Marine Country" with the bulk of Allied combat power furnished by the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions supported by the 1st Marine Air Wing (1 MAW). The 1st MAW is equivalent to almost three Air Force tactical fighter wings, containing 109 F-4s, 70 A-4s, and 41 A-6s,<sup>10/</sup> in addition to its assorted reconnaissance, transport, and helicopter units. Marine doctrine relied heavily on a large amount of close air support (CAS) plus Naval gunfire, because its divisions were organized for amphibious operations and were relatively light on organic artillery. Thus, the Marines needed more CAS aircraft per maneuver battalion than the U.S. Army normally expected from the Air Force.

The enemy offensive in I CTZ during the winter and spring of 1968 caused COMUSMACV to deploy additional U.S. Army units into the zone, but Air Force strength remained unchanged. In 1968, the U.S. Army maneuver battalions generally outnumbered those of the Marines, but the 1st MAW contained the preponderance of tactical air resources near enough to be responsive. It was clearly unwise for the Marine air to remain dedicated to Marine ground exclusively, so COMUSMACV directed in early 1968 that all U.S. strike and reconnaissance aircraft be "pooled" and assigned to support ground units according to their needs, without regard to service. Concurrently, Marine ground units were provided additional artillery, so that a balance



[REDACTED]

was achieved in supporting firepower. This "single management of air" by Deputy COMUSMACV for Air (Commander, 7AF) still remains in effect. <sup>11/</sup>

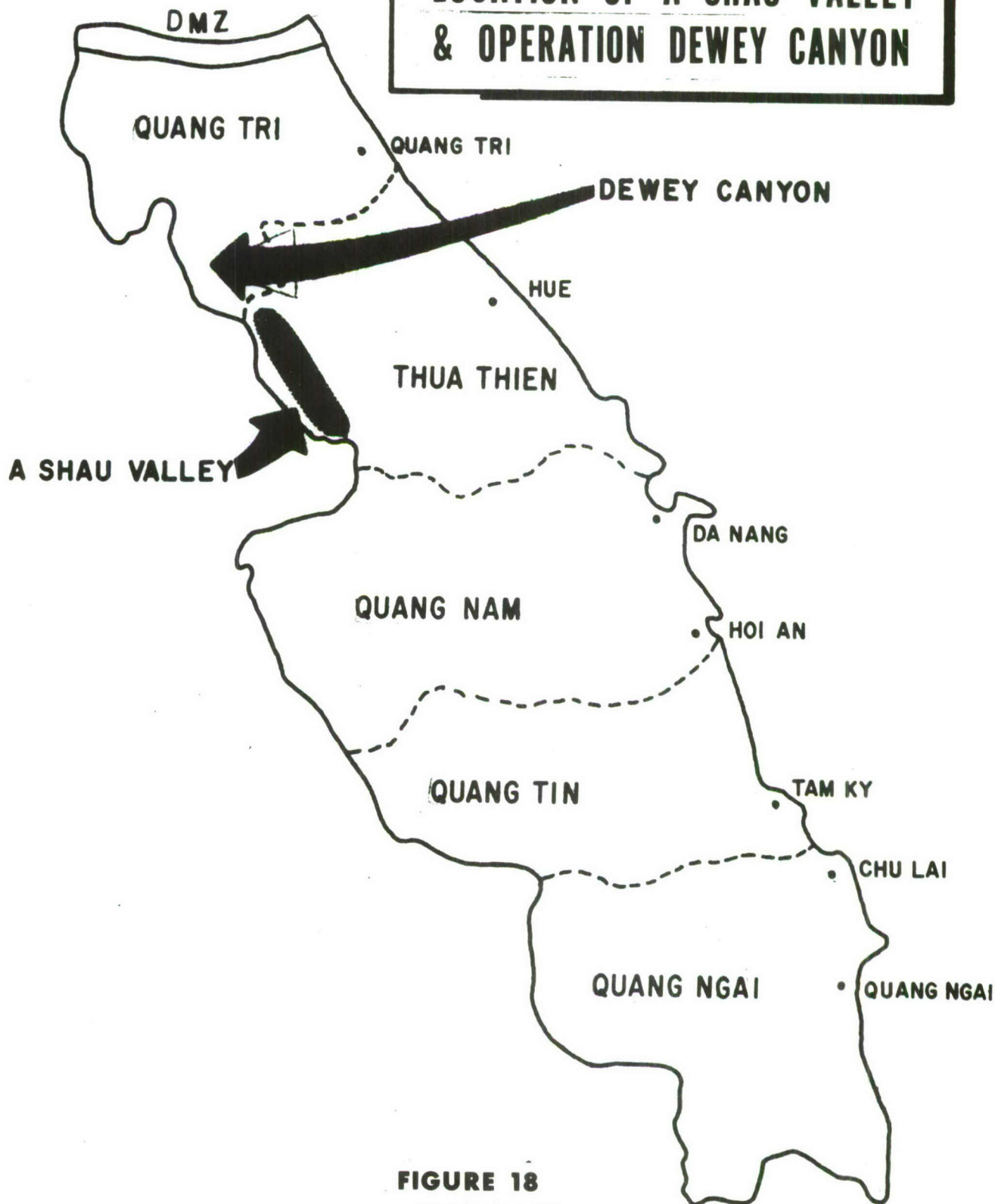
Single management was perhaps the most important factor involved in the utilization of airpower in I CTZ, for it allowed Horn DASC, the manager, to integrate the resources of the 1st MAW into a single system. This greatly increased the overall balance and flexibility of air in I Corps.

I CTZ normally received an allotment of about 33 percent of all in-country air from the Tactical Air Support Element (TASE), MACV. This airpower was used along with aggressive ground operations to preempt the Fourth Offensive. There were, in addition to those ground spoiling operations already mentioned, two special interdiction efforts that deserve special mention. One of these, interdiction of the A Shau Valley, was carried out almost exclusively by the Air Force. (Figs. 18, 19.)

The A Shau Valley was a militarily significant avenue of approach and resupply into north and central I CTZ, running northwest to southeast, just inside South Vietnam along the Laotian border. COMUSMACV, prior to March 1968, had directed that Route 547, leading eastward from the valley toward Hue, be interdicted and ordered extensive visual reconnaissance (VR) carried out in the area. In late March, the VR revealed the enemy was using the A Shau Valley and was constructing an alternate Route, 547A, paralleling 547, with an extensive trail system and antiaircraft defenses. <sup>12/</sup>

The Allied response was Operation DELAWARE in April 1968, with more than

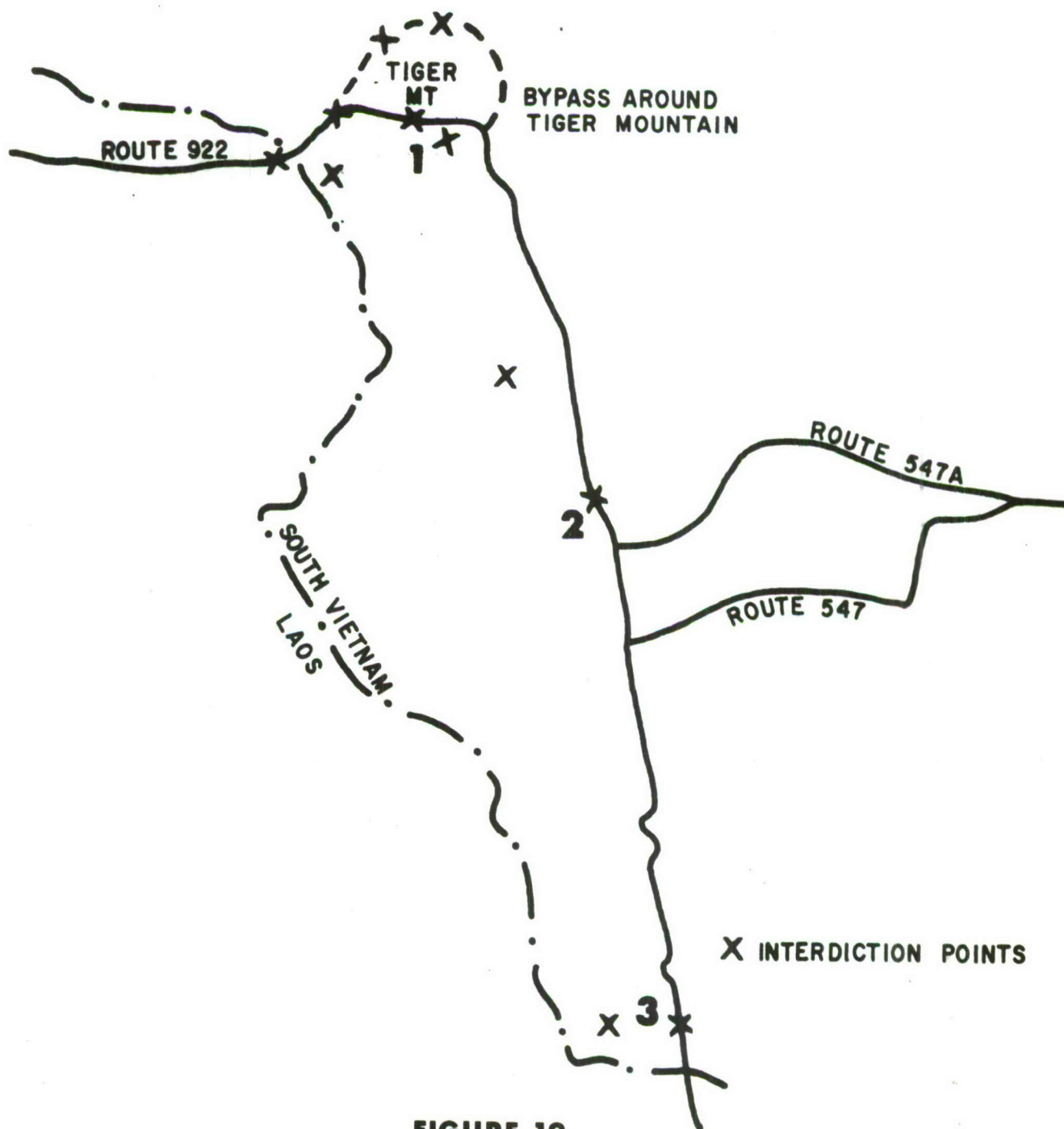
**LOCATION OF A SHAU VALLEY  
& OPERATION DEWEY CANYON**



**FIGURE 18**



**A SHAU VALLEY INTERDICTION CAMPAIGN**



**FIGURE 19**

[REDACTED]

100 ARC LIGHT and 200 tac air sorties expended, followed by an air mobile assault by the 1st Cavalry Division. The campaign was successful--large amounts of equipment and supplies were captured. The Allied forces withdrew from the valley, but kept close watch over it.<sup>13/</sup>

After Operation DELAWARE, DASC Victor (subordinate to Horn DASC, serving the XXIV Corps) conducted active VR and air interdiction over the A Shau Valley. On 1 June, the valley was designated as "Specified Strike Zone Victor", a free-strike area, in which anything moving and not positively identified as friendly was considered hostile. It could be hit without obtaining a clearance. During August, another ground assault into the area took place--Operation SOMERSET PLAIN--during which the Specified Strike Zone designation was suspended, because of friendly troops in the valley. After the operation, DASC Victor's free-strike program was again resumed.<sup>14/</sup>

The enemy continued to use the valley and, with the halt of the bombing of North Vietnam on 1 November 1968, infiltration activity and the flow of supplies increased. For this reason, Allied commanders decided to initiate a major air campaign to interdict the valley.<sup>15/</sup>

#### The A Shau Interdiction Campaign

On 7 December 1968, a meeting of key personnel was held at Horn DASC to formulate plans for the interdiction campaign in the A Shau Valley. Three locations were selected on Route 548 as primary choke points (Fig. 19); the first one was at the northern end of the valley along the southern face of Tiger Mountain; the second lay near the center of the valley where the road



[REDACTED]

follows a narrow ridge. These points were to be cut initially by daylight visual bombing and at night by COMBAT SKYSPOT (CSS), followed by the use of BLU-52 (a munition containing a riot control agent) to hamper road repair and hopefully, to keep the choke points closed.<sup>16/</sup>

FACs were scheduled over the valley continually during the daylight hours for VR and strike control. During the hours of darkness, Army OV-1 Mohawks, equipped with side-looking radar, were to be used in conjunction with the Marine A-6s. The OV-1s would detect activity in the valley and notify an A-6 of the general locations, whereupon the A-6 was to attempt target acquisition with its internal moving target indicator, and then release ordnance on the "mover".<sup>17/</sup>

The effort began on 9 December and during the first week several factors were noted. The first choke point was closed, but the enemy had constructed a by-pass around the northern slope of Tiger Mountain, rejoining Route 548 farther to the south. The second choke point proved to be unsuitable, because the valley was too wide and the enemy was able to drive his trucks around the road-cuts. Point three in the extreme southern end of the valley remained open because of the weather--low ceilings prevented visual bombing.<sup>18/</sup>

The Seventh Air Force planners then sought to make the interdiction more effective by adjustments in plans. The new route around Tiger Mountain was cut at additional choke points, as were the roads and trails approaching the area. The period of 16 December 1968 to 15 January 1969 was characterized by an increase in enemy activity (both road repair and antiaircraft defense), while the Allied effort was correspondingly intensified. COMBAT SKYSPOT was

[REDACTED]

substituted for the A-6 bombing to improve accuracy against the interdiction points, and ARC LIGHT missions were flown against the northern portion of Tiger Mountain. But the enemy was getting through, albeit with difficulty, repairing the roads and moving during the hours of darkness. In some instances, the enemy was transporting the supplies up to the choke points, offloading them, and carrying them across the cut to be reloaded on the other side. The Air Force responded to this by selecting more points for road-cuts and using new ordnance (FMU-72 delay-fuzed bombs set to explode during the night), along with the seeding of cuts with XM-42 (Gravel), an area denial weapon.<sup>19/</sup>

From 16 to 31 January 1969, there was a reduction in air activity and a change in the Area of Operations of the campaign. The area just east of the valley was reported to contain an important base camp, so VR and airstrikes were carried out on the location, but nothing much was seen. To the west, however, along the Laotian border, a FAC saw a truck and a cache of supplies and directed an airstrike against them. The bombs uncovered a large storage and transshipment complex with bunkers, revetments, and more trucks. Additional airstrikes were expended and the final Bomb Damage Assessment included four trucks destroyed, three damaged, and 33 secondary explosions, but more significantly, it was discovered that the area west of the valley was being used to pile up supplies.

Another change in the AO took place when Route 922, the extension of Route 548 into Laos, was struck. All air activity had to be coordinated with the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) and special care was exercised due to the density of air traffic brought on by out-country



[REDACTED]

FACs and aircraft flying in the area. BDA on the Laotian portion of Route 922 was several trucks destroyed or damaged. <sup>20/</sup>

During this latter period, the second special operation to interdict the A Shau Valley was carried out. Operation DEWEY CANYON was started on 22 January 1969 in the upper portion of the valley and extending to the north along the Laotian border (Fig. 18). Allied commanders believed the air interdiction had backed up supplies into this area, and that the enemy had probably been forced to create a large storage complex there, so it became an attractive objective. Marine ground units were inserted to search for these stores upstream from the choke points. The search was successful; the Marines discovered the largest supply and ammunition cache ever found in South Vietnam. A partial list of the materiel captured included 1,133 individual and 220 crew-served weapons, and hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition. <sup>21/</sup> Clearly then, the air interdiction of the valley had been effective. Results of DEWEY CANYON proved the massive bombardment of the area and the closing of the choke points had made passage through the valley so difficult that supplies had to be stored.

The air interdiction of the A Shau Valley continued at a reduced level until 28 February. The strikes in the phase were concentrated in the southern end of the valley, with VR extending south into a Laotian salient and north into the DEWEY CANYON AO. Although foot traffic could not be accurately gauged, there was little indication of truck movement. The overall success of the air and ground interdiction of the valley is difficult to assess, but the enemy was denied free movement through the area and he lost a huge

[REDACTED]

amount of materiel, which probably contributed to the low level of intensity of the Fourth Offensive in northern and central I CTZ.<sup>22/</sup>

#### The Fourth Offensive

During the period preceding Tet, intelligence sources indicated the VC/NVA were planning major attacks throughout I CTZ. The sources (PWs and agents) indicated the urban centers, such as Da Nang, were targeted and that an effort would be made to capture or destroy pacified areas in the provinces.<sup>23/</sup> There were also hints of drives by major enemy units across the DMZ, and attempts to duplicate the degree of success that the enemy achieved in January 1968.

The enemy's activities just prior to Tet consisted mainly of avoiding contact with Allied forces and attempts to resupply. Enemy-initiated actions remained at a low level as he sought to preserve his strength for the approaching offensive.<sup>24/</sup> The Allies, on the other hand, continued aggressive operations against the VC/NVA LOCs, base areas, and avenues of approach to objectives, all the while hoping the enemy would commit some of his major units so that the Allies could gain a decisive victory.

The offensive began in I CTZ, as was the case throughout the Republic of Vietnam, in the early morning hours of 23 February. Population centers and military installations came under attacks by fire, but major ground attacks did not develop. ABFs occurred in the northern portion of the corps area. Similarly, the Da Nang complex received in-coming rounds on the 23d, 25th, and 26th, but no significant ground attacks were carried out. The two



[REDACTED]

southern provinces, in addition to enduring a disproportionate number of ABFs, were the scene of ground actions but not on the scale of Tet 1968.<sup>25/</sup>

The first of these ground contacts took place south of Chu Lai, when elements of the 23d Infantry Division came upon a village in which the enemy was entrenched. As soon as the enemy's occupation of the village was recognized, the American troops drew back and pounded it with artillery fire, some of which was seen to ricochet into the air. The ground troops then moved to attack following the artillery bombardment, but they immediately came under intense fire, and once again drew back. The artillery barrage had not done the job, so the Allies decided to expend heavy air-delivered ordnance on the village.<sup>26/</sup>

Horn DASC requested that the 1st MAF provide sorties armed with 2,000 pound bombs (MK-84s) for use against the enemy strong-point. The Marines responded with the requested weapons and a total of eight sorties were flown against the target. American troops attacked again the next day and this time they met almost no resistance. They found 43 VC/NVA killed by air, and also discovered why the artillery had not been effective--the enemy had a vast tunnel complex built under the village, extending down for several levels and protected by steel doors. The total number of KBA will never be known, for the MK-84s had collapsed most of the underground tunnels and rooms, probably killing a large number of the enemy's troops and entombing their bodies.<sup>27/</sup>

Another significant action took place at the Tien Phouc Special Forces

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Camp in Quang Tin Province. The camp underwent ABFs and was surrounded by the enemy on 23 February. The fighting around the camp perimeter continued until 1 April; however, the enemy did not make a serious assault and merely kept the camp's defenders occupied. It appeared that the enemy's object was not to overrun the camp. Allied commanders believed the enemy wanted free movement around the camp and so besieged it. At any rate, the long drawn-out skirmish in the area resulted in 300 VC/NVA killed by combined ground and air action.<sup>28/</sup>

An incident occurred in Quang Ngai Province during the Fourth Offensive which deserves special mention. Elements of an enemy battalion entered the village of Dia An Dong and occupied it. The villagers fled to an ARVN regimental command post some 400 meters away and informed the soldiers there of the exact locations of the VC/NVA in the village. The ARVN ground commander relayed the information to a FAC overhead who was directing airstrikes and the locations indicated by the villagers were hit. The FAC was told by the U.S. Army advisor on the scene that the South Vietnamese civilians cheered each bomb impact on their village and gave additional data for successive airstrikes.<sup>29/</sup>

The village was 80 percent destroyed and the ARVN commander credited the airstrikes with 35 VC/NVA KBA. But the importance of the episode is found in the attitude of the South Vietnamese villagers, for this is an instance in which they actively assisted the Allies in directing airstrikes against their own homes.<sup>30/</sup> Clearly, the people were quite willing to destroy the structures of their own village to save it as a free institution. Homes

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could be rebuilt more easily than security.

### Post Tet Wrap-up

The enemy's tactic during the Fourth Offensive in I CTZ consisted mostly of attacks by fire. The level and focus of this enemy offensive in 1969 is best illustrated by statistics which reveal the overall scope and areas of primary concern:<sup>31/</sup>

#### NUMBER OF ATTACKS BY FIRE

	4th Quarter, 1968	1st Quarter, 1969
Northern I CTZ	12	8
Quang Da Special Sector	22	11
Southern I CTZ	18	32

#### NUMBER OF GROUND ATTACKS

Northern I CTZ	0	0
Quang Da Special Sector	1	3
Southern I CTZ	0	2

The overall statistics relating to the use of air during the period encompassing the Fourth Offensive reveal a surge in air activity during the last two weeks of January, another surge immediately after the beginning of the offensive, and again in late March. From 17 to 30 January 1969, an average of 1,726 sorties were flown weekly, with an average of 629 of those being immediates and 221.5 supporting troops in contact (TIC). The second surge, from 21 to 27 February, included 1,806 sorties flown, 679 immediates and 319 TIC. The last surge was during the week of 21-27 March with 1,808 sorties carried out, of which 761 were immediates and 405 were for TIC.<sup>32/</sup>

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<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOTAL SORTIES</u>	<u>IMMEDIATES</u>	<u>TIC</u>
3-9 Jan	1,139	221	64
10-16 Jan	1,416	343	63
17-23 Jan	1,727	614	216
24-30 Jan	1,725	644	227
31-6 Feb	1,076	272	56
7-13 Feb	1,585	530	73
14-20 Feb	1,549	608	271
21-27 Feb	1,806	697	319
28-6 Mar	1,451	593	274
7-13 Mar	1,362	424	207
14-20 Mar	1,492	569	315
21-27 Mar	1,808	761	405
28-3 Apr	1,393	398	157

In summary, the enemy's effort in I Corps during the Fourth Offensive did not strain the capability of Allied air to respond. The level of air activity remained relatively constant, despite the enemy's attacks, but the focus of air operations was shifted to meet the brunt of the enemy's offensive. The enemy's main effort fell in the southern portion of I CTZ. If Marine tactical air had been available only to Marine ground units, as had been the case before Single Management, a large portion of the airpower in I CTZ could not have been employed where it was most needed. Single Management allowed the Allies to employ their combined tactical air resources with economy of force where the enemy's activity was minimal.<sup>33/</sup> Thus a preponderance of air



[REDACTED]

was available to achieve Mass at the decisive time and place--against the enemy's main attack.

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## CHAPTER V

### THE OFFENSIVE PERIOD IN II AND IV CORPS

In the II and IV CTZs, the situation prior to the Fourth Offensive was basically similar to that in the other two corps in that the enemy generally avoided contacts, while attempting to position his forces and supplies for the coming attacks. Finally, when the time arrived for the country-wide Fourth Offensive, the enemy could not, for reasons of Allied preemption or his own lack of resolve, carry out large-scale offensive operations. Rather, he resorted to large numbers of ABFs with limited ground probes in both zones, but not on the scale of his activities in III Corps, and certainly not on the scale of the Tet Offensive in 1968.

#### II CTZ

In January 1969, enemy-initiated activity in II Corps consisted mostly of ABFs and limited ground probing operations. Principal airfields at Kontum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thout (Fig. 20) received 122-mm rocket fire, as did other Allied installations such as Camp Radcliff, north-northwest of An Khe, and the district headquarters at An Khe. There were no significant ground assaults during January, but PW interrogations indicated the VC/NVA would attempt an offensive in February, probably after Tet.<sup>1/</sup>

During the first three weeks of February, the VC/NVA continued to avoid major contact, while possibly preparing for his post-Tet offensive. Then, on the night of 22-23 February, attack levels increased sharply, consisting of LOC interdiction efforts, ground probes, small unit contacts, and a large

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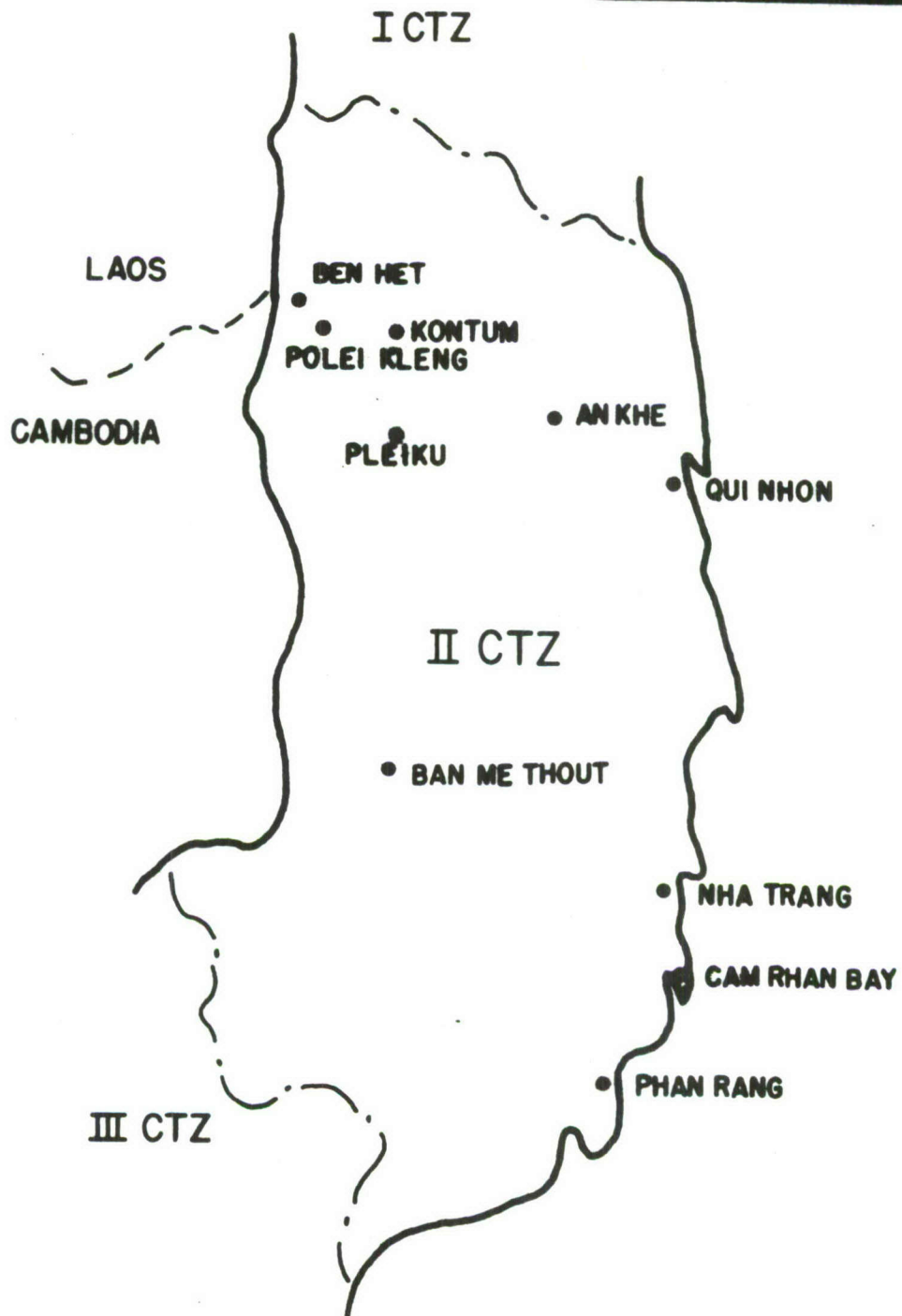
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number of ABFs. In the northern portion of II CTZ, the enemy carried out ABFs against the Ben Het Special Forces Camp, Kontum, Pleiku, and Phu Cat Air Base, as well as ABFs and ground probes against other military installations. Farther to the south, the enemy shelled Ban Me Thout, Nha Trang, and the Phan Rang Air Base. The latter incident was the most destructive to the Allies as 23 aircraft were damaged and other materiel was lost.<sup>2/</sup>

The following week, attacks by fire continued on a reduced level. Kontum Province, however, was the scene of significant ground action when the enemy attempted to take the Ben Het Special Forces Camp, a few miles from the Cambodian border. Beginning on 1 March, the camp underwent continuous small arms/automatic weapons (SA/AW) fire, and that same day, one of its patrols encountered a large enemy force about six kilometers north-northwest of the camp. The ABFs against Ben Het continued sporadically until 2140 hours on 3 March, and then at 2230 hours, the enemy fired a heavy barrage of 85-mm artillery rounds at the camp from a location inside Cambodia. The barrage was following a ground attack by an estimated VC/NVA battalion, supported by ten Soviet-built PT-76 amphibious tanks.<sup>3/</sup>

The Allied command declared a tactical emergency and called in Army gunships, Spooky (AC-47), and tac air to help the camp's defenders turn the enemy back. The attack ceased abruptly at 0115 hours on 4 March, and the enemy began to withdraw.<sup>4/</sup> FACs, tac air, and artillery continued to harass the enemy armored vehicles as they retreated toward the safety of the Cambodian border, and the Allies succeeded in destroying two of the PT-76s. The remainder of the enemy force fled across the border. The incident was the

**II CORPS TACTICAL ZONE**



**FIGURE 20**



[REDACTED]

enemy's first attempted use of armor in II CTZ, demonstrating his desire to achieve a quick victory. Instead, the attack brought him defeat and a costly loss of men and equipment.<sup>5/</sup>

During the same period, the enemy was also active in the Polei Kleng area to the west of Kontum City. Heavy, short-duration contacts took place, one of which resulted in the VC/NVA achieving a measure of success. On 3 March, the 4th Infantry Division's Company A, 8th Infantry, became engaged in a fire-fight with an estimated 100 enemy soldiers using small arms and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). Radio contact with the American unit was lost as heavy fighting continued throughout the night of 3-4 March.<sup>6/</sup> Early in the morning, the Allies attempted to reinforce the beleaguered company, but the insertion was aborted due to heavy enemy gunfire.<sup>7/</sup> Tac air and armed helicopters were employed against the enemy force; the struggle continued until 1515 hours when Company A was extracted, with 50 of its soldiers missing in action (MIA).<sup>8/</sup>

The enemy's offensive during the first week of March went forward with ABFs against Allied installations such as Cam Ranh Bay and Ban Me Thout. The Allies reacted with sweep operations, one of which netted the largest rice cache found in the II CTZ. Elements of the 503d Infantry discovered 346 tons of the essential commodity hidden near the II CTZ-III CTZ border in Lam Dong Province.<sup>9/</sup>

The period from 7 to 20 March was marked by continued ABFs against military installations throughout II CTZ, and increased ABFs and ground attacks against friendly hamlets and villages. The upsurge in population

the

harassment indicated an enemy concern with GVN pacification successes, but the enemy effort did not gain a significant victory, and did not lessen GVN control in the countryside. <sup>10/</sup>

During the last ten days of March, the enemy increased his ABFs shelling Ben Het, Kontum City, and other targets throughout the corps, as well as continuing his tactic of population harassment. The VC/NVA also employed sappers, which on 21 March blew up the Qui Nhon Tank Farm #2, destroying 727,000 gallons of POL. On the same day, near Kontum City, sappers also destroyed 26 pieces of heavy construction equipment. <sup>11/</sup>

The Fourth Offensive in II CTZ drew to a close in early April without the enemy's having launched a single major assault or sustained drive. His tactic was chiefly one of ABFs, as it appeared that he did not plan to risk the destruction of his major units, but rather sought to remind the Allies of his continued presence in the II CTZ.

#### IV CTZ

Prior to the Fourth Offensive, activity in the IV CTZ was light as the enemy forces generally avoided contact and the Allies maintained pressure on the enemy's base areas. The VC/NVA faced a deteriorating situation in the corps with the Hoi Chanh rate steadily increasing, the enemy caches being discovered, his LOCs being interdicted, and former safe areas, such as the U Minh forest, being breached. <sup>12/</sup>

There were numerous indications that the enemy was planning stepped up



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IV CTZ

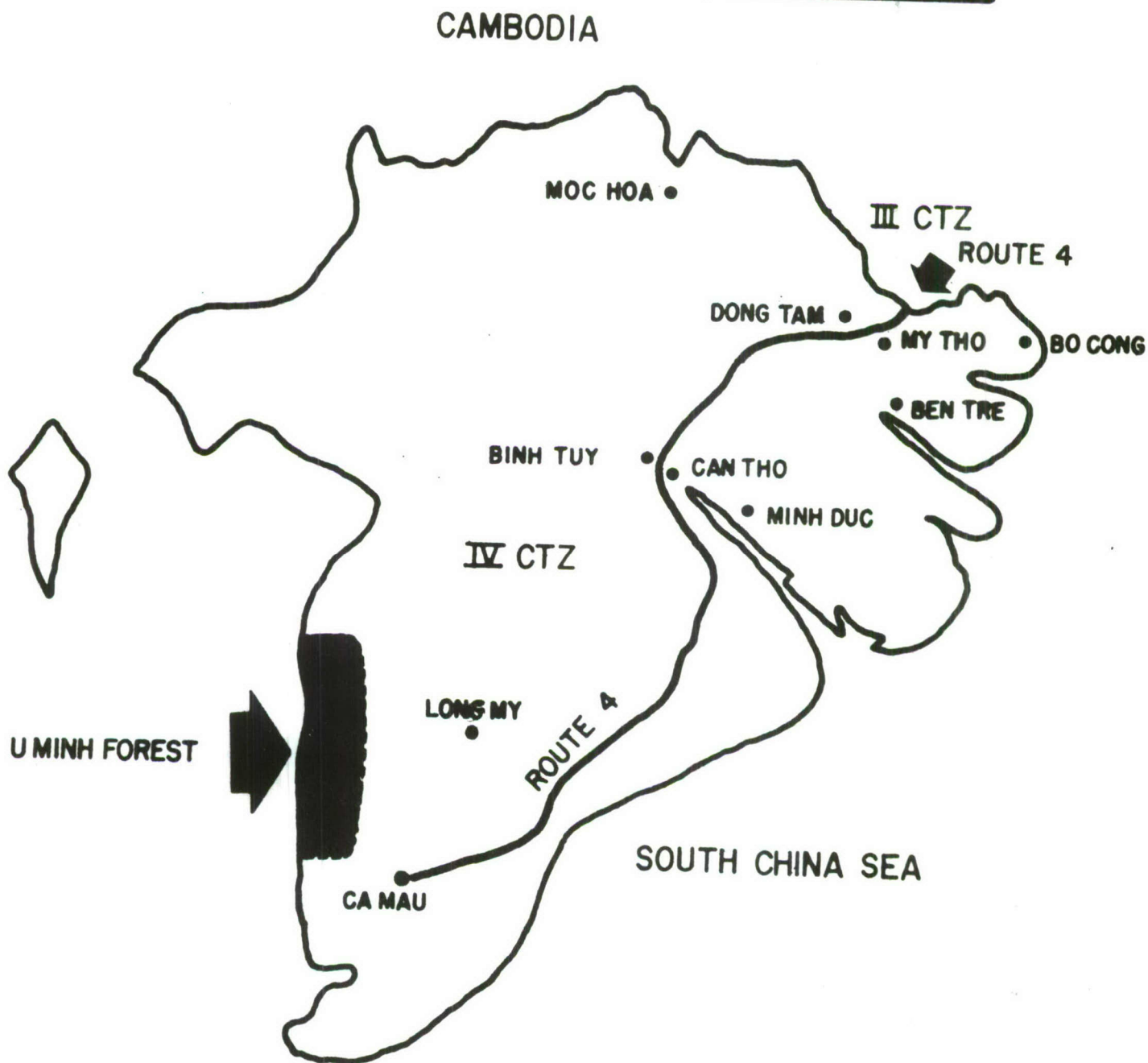


FIGURE 21

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activity in the IV CTZ as part of his country-wide offensive. Allied analysis, however, while granting the possibility that the enemy could carry out ground assaults on selected targets, predicted that his main tactic would be ABFs and increased terrorist/sapper actions. It was considered likely that a special effort would be made to interdict major Allied LOCs (Fig. 21) to stop the patrols that were challenging the base areas, and to hamper the Accelerated Pacification Campaign.<sup>13/</sup>

Intelligence sources also indicated that the ABFs, or whatever tactic the enemy would choose, were designed to have political as well as military effects. The enemy had hopes that the increased level of attacks would undermine the South Vietnamese people's feelings of security, and influence the Paris Talks by stirring up American public opinion to bring about an early end to the violence.<sup>14/</sup> At any rate, the enemy in IV CTZ was supposed to carry out an offensive in the corps, and he sought to do so.

During the first three weeks in February, VC/NVA activity remained at a low level with very few encounters of consequence occurring, and those few were due to aggressive Allied operations. On 14 February, U.S. units in Kien Hoa Province killed 62 enemy soldiers in a contact southeast of Ben Tre City. Later, on 20 February, U.S. operations in Dinh Tuong and Kien Hoa Provinces resulted in 144 enemy KIA.<sup>15/</sup> The friendly forces continued sweeps in various areas of IV CTZ, causing continued enemy casualties, discovering caches, and prohibiting the enemy's ability to mass his forces.<sup>16/</sup>

The enemy initiated what apparently was the beginning of the Fourth



[REDACTED]

Offensive in IV CTZ on the night of 23 February with more than 50 ABFs and incidents. Dong Tam, headquarters of the ARVN 7th and U.S. 9th Infantry Divisions, received an ABF which resulted in 49,000 gallons of fuel destroyed and 23 aircraft damaged. My Tho City received an ABF, as did Binh Thuy Air Base and Moc Hoa, the capital of Kien Tuong Province. Elsewhere in the corps, the enemy attempted to cut the LOCs, especially Route 4.<sup>17/</sup>

The enemy attacks continued into March, although they slackened in intensity. The enemy was able to mount another surge of activity on the 14th and 15th with approximately 50 more ABFs. Dong Tam was again hit, as was Long My, Minh Duc, and Ba Cong, but, for the most part, there was no significant damage until 26 March.<sup>18/</sup> On that day, Dong Tam underwent another ABF, which set fire to an ammunition dump. A large amount of grenades, artillery, and mortar rounds subsequently exploded, destroying (in addition to the ammunition) a large number of buildings and helicopters, and damaging one ship which was anchored in the adjacent My Tho River.<sup>19/</sup> During the week of 26 March, there was a total of 83 significant incidents, but during the following week, which is generally accepted as the end of the Fourth Offensive, only 45 were recorded.<sup>20/</sup>

The investigation into the Fourth Offensive in IV CTZ revealed an interesting point that has been implied in the study of other areas. A study completed by the 6499th Special Activities Group pointed out the Hoi Chanh rate in IV CTZ (and possibly the rate in the other CTZs was<sup>21/</sup> attributed in large measure to airpower. The study stated, in part:

[REDACTED]

*"...the reasons for the very high numbers of returnees under the Chieu Hoi Program indicated that airstrikes and fear of airstrikes was one of the three major factors causing VC to rally to the GVN. Airpower is a factor with which the VC simply cannot cope; its destructive capability and psychological impact have been a significant contributing factor to the success of the IV Corps Chieu Hoi Program. Moreover, the morale and esprit of a unit is always virtually destroyed when the unit is subjected to an airstrike. Even sources who have never experienced a strike will cite fear of airstrikes as a reason for rallying to the GVN."*



[REDACTED]

CHAPTER VI  
REFLECTIONS ON THE FOURTH OFFENSIVE

*"We frustrated the attack which was launched in late February. As a result the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong failed to achieve their military objectives." 1/*

--President Richard M. Nixon

By any conventional military standards, the enemy's Fourth Offensive was a failure. The traditional criteria for evaluating a military campaign are the principles of war. Since the enemy's activity was confined to the ground, the following critique will employ eight of the nine principles of war recognized by the U.S. Army. One principle, Simplicity, is of marginal relevance to the offensive; the eight pertinent principles are defined as follows:<sup>2/</sup>

Mass: Achieve superiority in combat power at the decisive time and place.

Economy of Force: Allocate to secondary efforts the minimum essential combat power.

Maneuver: Position your military resources to favor the accomplishment of your mission.

Surprise: Accomplish your purpose before the enemy can effectively react.

Security: Never permit the enemy to gain an unexpected advantage.

Unity of Command: For each task there should be unity of effort under a single responsible commander.

The Offensive: Seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.


The Objective: Direct all efforts toward a decisive, obtainable goal.

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The principles of Mass and Economy of Force go hand in hand. Using Economy of Force in pursuit of secondary objectives frees the resources to achieve Mass at the decisive objective. Prior to the Fourth Offensive, the enemy maintained his strength in I CTZ and shifted some units from II and IV CTZs in a weak attempt to achieve Mass in III CTZ<sup>3/</sup>, but he remained outnumbered and out-gunned everywhere.<sup>4/</sup> He could have attempted greater concentration near his objectives, using Maneuver to bring a superior force to bear against a vulnerable Allied position and then achieving Surprise by attacking before the Allies could react effectively. But aggressive Allied air and ground reconnaissance denied the enemy Security. Steady contact with the enemy kept the Allies more nearly assured of his position and movements. Wherever and whenever the enemy sought to concentrate, he became vulnerable to the massive combat power of friendly ground and air forces. Thus, his concentrations were broken up and he was unable either to achieve Mass or to retain Unity of Command, because his units became separated and his attacks lacked unity of effort; the piecemeal attack on Bien Hoa Air Base is perhaps the most vivid example of these failures.<sup>5/</sup> Finally, the Fourth Offensive failed to satisfy even the tenets of the principle of The Offensive; although the enemy was able sporadically to seize the initiative, he could retain it only very briefly, and was never able to exploit it for any lasting or critical advantage.

On the other hand, the Allies enjoyed both superior firepower and mobility, and COMUSMACV blended these elements into a flexible, aggressive counter-offensive. We have seen how friendly forces were deployed with



  
The Economy of Force in II and IV CTZs to assure sufficient Mass in I and III CTZs. The principle of Maneuver was used to find the enemy and enhance Allied Security. Once the enemy was located, both Surprise and The Offensive were implicit in our quick spoiling attacks.

But perhaps the most lasting military lesson to be learned from the Fourth Offensive concerns the benefits the Allies derived through Unity of Command. Gen. George S. Brown was not only Commander, Seventh Air Force, he was also Deputy COMUSMACV for Air. In the latter position, he was the single responsible commander charged to achieve unity of effort in the employment of strike and reconnaissance aircraft.<sup>6/</sup> We have seen how Unity of Command enabled Economy of Force and Mass to be dramatically applied in the shifting of tactical air strikes from northern to southern I CTZ and especially in the massive redirection of ARC LIGHT sorties into III CTZ.<sup>7/</sup> If air resources had been parcelled out evenly to ground commanders, or had been dedicated to support the forces within a fixed geographical area, the Allies would have lost the unique advantages of airpower--speed, range, and flexibility. Only through Unity of Command was it possible to bring airpower to bear at the decisive time and place in agreement with the principles of war and in support of the most critical ground engagements.

Finally, the flexibility and responsiveness of air enabled ground commanders to be more audacious in their deployments; smaller units could be dispatched to search for the enemy with more confidence that a chance engagement with a powerful enemy force would not end in disaster--Mass could be quickly regained from the air.<sup>8/</sup>

[REDACTED]

So the enemy was denied the military objectives of his Fourth Offensive; his offensive was preempted by aggressive ground and air operations of Allied forces. The vital role of air in achieving the enemy's defeat was fully recognized by the U.S. Army. For example, at the close of the campaign, the Commanding General of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division wrote the following words of praise:<sup>9/</sup>

AVDCCP  
SUBJECT: *Tactical Air Support*

3 April 1969

*Commanding General  
7th Air Force  
Tan Son Nhut, RVN*

1. *Throughout the Post Tet campaign, the VC/NVA efforts to launch a major campaign have been successfully pre-empted. In those cases where the enemy has initiated offensive actions against elements of the 25th Infantry Division, his forces have been literally engulfed with overwhelming, devastating firepower. The close air support provided by your command has been an integral and important part of this firepower.*
2. *The response of your fighter bombers to requests for support by convoy escort forces merits special mention. In each case where enemy ambushes have been attempted against the convoy the highly responsive firepower provided by your command has materially assisted the 25th Division in virtually annihilating the enemy.*
3. *With the advent of increased night operations in the 25th Division TAOR, the firepower and illumination provided by the Air Force has been a significant factor in combating and defeating the enemy in an environment he has long considered a sanctuary.*
4. *I would like personally to thank you and the members of your command for the outstanding, professional support you are providing the "Tropic Lightning" Division.*

*Ellis W. Williamson  
Major General, USA  
Commanding*





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## GLOSSARY

AA	Antiaircraft
ABCCC	Airborne Battlefield Command and Control
ABF	Attack-by-Fire
ABN	Airborne
AGL	Above Ground Level
ALO	Air Liaison Officer
AO	Area of Operation
APC	Accelerated Pacification Campaign; Armored Personnel Carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BDA	Bomb Damage Assessment
BHAB	Bien Hoa Air Base
BHTAC	Bien Hoa Tactical Air Command
CAS	Close Air Support
CBU	Cluster Bomb Unit
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CMD	Capital Military District
COMUSMACV	Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CSS	COMBAT SKYSPOT
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DART	Deployable Automatic Relay Terminal
DASC	Direct Air Support Center
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DSDT	DASC Decision Time
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FFV	Field Force Vietnam
FSB	Fire Support Base
FWMAF	Free World Military Assistance Forces
GVN	Government of Vietnam
KIA	Killed in Action
LOC	Line of Communication
LZ	Landing Zone
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
MAW	Marine Air Wing
MIA	Missing in Action

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mm	millimeter
MR	Military Region
MRTTH	Military Region Tui-Thien Hue
NLF	National Liberation Front
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
NVN	North Vietnam
OpCon	Operational Control
PF	Popular Forces
POL	Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants
PW	Prisoner of War
QDSS	Quang Da Special Sector
RF	Regional Forces
RIF	Reconnaissance-in-Force
ROK	Republic of Korea
RPG	Rocket-Propelled Grenade
SA/AW	Small Arms/Automatic Weapons
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility
TASE	Tactical Air Support Element
TF	Task Force
TFW	Tactical Fighter Wing
TIC	Troops-in-Contact
TOT	Time Over Target
VC	Viet Cong
VCI	Viet Cong Infrastructure
VNAF	Vietnam Air Force
VR	Visual Reconnaissance